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Date 16. 11. 1971

GAUNTLET

BY LORD GORELL

FICTION

OUT OF THE BLUE
IN THE NIGHT
D.E.Q.
ROSAMUND
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"HE WHO FIGHTS——"
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MANY MANSIONS

GAUNTLET

BY LORD GORELL

LONDON

JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

First Edition . . . 1931

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TO
ROSEMARY AND TIMOTHY JOHN

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CHAPTER I

“Thirty-six and twenty-three!
Very, very strange are we!
Lord, what fools these mortals be!”

THE wheels of the train fashioned themselves uncontrollably into the jingle and hammered it out relentlessly. There was silence in the carriage itself, and in the silence it seemed to her as though all the forces of motion were engaged in an eager mockery, distastefully triumphant.

Was it possible that she was married, actually embarked upon the unknown sea? Through her gloved hand Cecilia clutched with nervous fingers the little golden circle that was evidence of so great a change: its unfamiliar hardness sent a singular confirmation to her brain. It had not been there when she awoke; she would bear it with her into the grave: it was unbelievable, and yet it was true. He, the stranger sitting opposite to her now in this small, whirling world, had placed it there: she remembered the act as though in dream. She had not felt him to be a stranger at the time, rather he had been the one reality in a realm of mist. Why did he seem removed from her by the very link that bound their lives together?

Cecilia stole a glance at him, hoping he would speak and shatter the frightening spell that the rhythmic thudding of the wheels was now weaving upon her. He had talked and laughed for the first hour of the journey, and so had she; she had responded to his lead eagerly, joyously. There had been much to discuss and his quick humour had played for her delight over all the details, big and little, inherent in a wedding followed by a large gathering of relations and friends. But now he had fallen silent: his eyes were turned to the window, dreamily watching the landscape flooded by the last rays of the sinking sun. It was apparent that he had gone far away upon wings of thought, and Cecilia was at once too shy and too impatient with herself to break in upon his flight.

"Thirty-six and twenty-three!" Why were the wheels so persistent in their reminder of the difference of ages between them? She did not wish to be made to think of it; she attached to it no importance. She loved her husband, a state of heart that included automatically all his seniority of appearance and experience; she would not know him were he to step suddenly back through the last thirteen years and be of an age no more than her own. Her glance rested on him: unobserved she could re-estimate her companion; he was her husband now and all her thoughts must approach him from that wholly new angle. As she looked, she felt as though she were really seeing him for the first time. He sat upright, leaning a

little forward, his face almost in full profile to her. She could not see the look in his eyes, but that inability enabled her to study him. A strong face, clean-cut and well-bred, with a sensitive mouth and a firm chin—a kind face for all its strength, she thought with a quick little sense of relief, then smiled at herself for being so absurd. Had she ever had the slightest reason to doubt it?

Yet it was good in these bewildering moments to seek and to find reassurance. His hair, of a dark, russet tinge that had had to her fancy the suggestion of the foliage of a copper beech tree at midsummer, was just turning gray at the tips on his temple: the sun struck in almost malignantly as the train jostled on a curve and threw his forehead into light. Life had laid its hands upon him, not unkindly, giving at least as much as it took away, but at least leaving an impress that was no longer the untroubled confidence of youth. Cecilia, gazing, her eyes ready to flit on the instant if he should turn and find them upon him, was conscious afresh of the strangeness of the venture to which he and she were now unitedly committed. Her mind, struggling to find rest in the kindness, the well-known, the well-loved outlines, of his face, was driven away again into her own irrational and troublesome travels of imagination by the fresh recognition of all that he must have seen and known and done before ever she could have been of an age to take her place beside him. Thirteen years: she was a child when he had come to manhood—

and now she was his wife. "Very, very strange are we!"

Three months ago where was she and where was he? Strangers in very truth, even the existence of the one unknown to the other. How was it possible that two human beings who had lived apart so long without inconvenience, indeed with happiness, should in a short space of time be so changed that they could only find life endurable together? Her brain asked the question and immediately set it aside: it had been born so worded as to answer itself. How could she know what life together would be? What did she really know of the man into whose keeping she had placed herself, on whose companionship she had made herself dependent, with whose very name she was now clothed?

That last was perhaps the strangest of all: it was visible. On the seat beside her rested her new dressing-case with strange initials stamped upon it; from her suit-case in the rack dangled a label, hers not his, and yet it bore his name. Cecilia Brooke she was no longer: she had passed from existence, it seemed, without being aware of it; in her place was an unknown Cecilia Harland.

The transmigration was no cause for dissatisfaction, in a worldly sense at any rate. She was proud of her own stock, with its long line of lives well and quietly lived; inconspicuous and often humble, it was good stock, unblemished, self-respecting: she could take a new pride in her

husband's and know it to be of much greater consequence. Lady Harland would be of infinitely more importance than Miss Brooke: but it is only in certain warped and chilly natures that happiness draws its waters from importance, and to Cecilia it was only an addition to the strangeness that her wedding had been deemed by news-editors to be of interest. She could understand that the public might wish to know that Sir John Harland was being married: he was the most interesting person in the world to her, so obviously might he be of interest even to those who had never seen him; but it was neither credible nor reasonable that any but her very few friends should wish to read about her. It was so difficult to remember that his wedding was also hers: it might become more easy, and in time it might seem natural; in old age she might even look back and feel it inevitable. But she was as yet as far from such assumption as she was from old age.

At this moment, speeding away from the hubbub and the congratulations and the farewells, her head ringing with all the suppressed emotions and the murmured civilities, she could only gaze in astonishment at the mysterious thing she had done and the travelling companion who represented it. Wisdom or folly? Here was the die cast, and she did not know. Though her eyes grew warm as she looked at her husband till a sudden mistiness obscured him, she could not tell whether she were tremulously happy—a woman adventuring on the

threshold of her glory—or curiously frightened—a young girl withdrawing in spirit before the clamour of the unknown. She knew no more than that she was wrought up to a pitch as unlike her ordinary buoyant nature as this day had been unlike her ordinary cheerful life. “Lord, what fools these mortals be!”

The jingle of the scudding train began to torment her. How silly she was, far sillier than she must ever let John know! He sat so motionless, seemed somehow so like a vessel that has dropped anchor: a man, however kind, could never understand. The feeling as of an encaged bird began to creep over her—so uselessly: she had made the cage herself, or at least had entered it of her own free will, gladly. She could never speak of it: it existed only in her own ill-tutored imagination. He would think something far, far from the truth if she breathed a syllable of her thoughts, he would suspect that she was regretting her consent, and the suspicion, once born, would never leave him. But she must do something or her nervousness would gather in volume and so bring about a betrayal.

“A penny for your thoughts, John,” she said desperately.

He turned from the window with a slight start that revealed the depth of his abstraction and fixed his eyes on her with a steadiness of concentration of which he was only in small part aware.

“Your voice is the most beautiful thing in the world,” he replied slowly.

"That is not what you were thinking."

"It is what I am thinking now. It took the place of every other thought as soon as ever you spoke."

"But you were far away."

"Not really."

"Tell me where you were," she persisted.

"I was in Canada," he answered. "The glint of light on a stubble-field set me off, but not very far. I was thinking of my life as it was so short a time ago and as it is to-day."

"So different?"

"All the difference in the world!" His voice vibrated with a depth of feeling he could not wholly conceal; and, though it was wonderful to her, it awoke in her anew the shyness against which she had been fighting.

She leant back in her seat and closed her eyes, and immediately it gained upon her. The rhythm of the wheels resumed their domination. "Thirty-six and twenty-three!"

She made a fresh effort, deliberately devitalizing the moment.

"What time do we get in?"

"Poor child, you're tired, and no wonder. What an exhausting business it is, getting married. I'm none too fresh myself and you must be dead."

"I'm all right," she asserted mendaciously.

"Only an hour and ten minutes more," he said, glancing at his watch. "Shall I come over there?" He leant forward to move the coat that lay on the seat beside her.

"It's too public," she answered.

A little teasing light danced suddenly in his eyes : for a moment it seemed as though he would cross over in despite of her evasive disclaimer : then, as he noticed how unprepared she was, his look softened ; he threw himself back in his seat again, murmuring, "Disadvantages of a corridor train, certainly."

"It's a good train," she commented gratefully, watching a telegraph-pole skim past.

"Only one stop before ours."

"I'm glad."

She closed her eyes again, but at once the jingle repossessed her. "Very, very strange are we!" She fought against it still, exorcising its malice with all her power, but it would not go away. She was tired, very tired, as he had said ; days of preparation, hours of standing, minutes of stress and strain. Cold water might help her to regain the sanity of a happiness accomplished.

"I think I'll go and tidy," she said, opening her eyes suddenly.

Without waiting on her thought she rose to her feet and passed quickly into the corridor.

CHAPTER II

AS soon as she had passed out of her husband's sight by taking a step along the corridor Cecilia stopped and, laying her burning forehead against the cold glass of the window, looked out with unseeing eyes at the landscape over which was now beginning to brood the quietude of dusk. She was filled with impatience at herself for her inability to accept more calmly a state which, however strange and wonderful, was not only of constant occurrence to humanity but also the natural result of her own unfettered choice: she had been neither bullied nor persuaded into matrimony; she had entered into it with many trepidations indeed but none the less as naturally as the turning of a flower towards the sun. Her trepidations had all been against plunging from the known into the unknown and not against her husband: of him she felt neither doubt nor fear; of marriage she was quite unreasonably timid.

It was of little avail to tell herself that marriage occurred constantly to humanity: that did not alter the almost overwhelming truth that it was new to her. She did not know with any precision what she expected of it; she did know that her

expectations—if they had ever taken such shape as to deserve so precise a word—were clothed in a dream-like glory. Her father, she knew, had given to her mother a happiness over which had never spread even the smallest cloud, and after her death he had been uplifted in his loneliness by the memory of the gift that had been his : Cecilia, in passing to womanhood, had necessarily been brought to a realization that such a unity was rare, but the realization had never had power to challenge her unwhispered dreams. It was because they still meant so much to her, because John was now their embodiment, that she was overcome with this unreasoning timidity. Yet through the midst of it, and even as she murmured to herself, “ O God, give me courage, for I am very, very small ! ” she was aware of the queer, excited surge of her happiness. She would make this marriage of hers into such beauty : she need not fear to dream ; she would lift her dreams to truth—and John, in that robust, understanding way of his, with that buoyancy of strength and humour that seemed to her to belong so peculiarly to him, would be always beside her, widening the boundaries of her vision and showing to her all the kingdoms of the world.

Her eyes grew misty with her sudden exultation, and then with a quick rebound to reality she came out of her self-communing, and, smiling a little at her own folly, she moved with a fresh resolution up the corridor. She no longer felt tired or oppressed ; she was still tremulously shy, but very

simple and very happy. She put up a hand to replace one of the light brown curls that had broken rebelliously from under her little hat, and in the movement felt with renewed consciousness the hidden presence of her wedding-ring. It was true, then; yes, as true as life itself. She paused again to taste to the full the knowledge—a young figure, small and slender, with an abundance of health and activity in her glowing cheeks.

As she moved up the corridor, swaying slightly to the motion of the speeding train, she had about her something of the resilient grace of a little yacht driven by the wind and rising to the crest of a wave. Her eyes, hazel in colour, were bright now, her lips half-parted: she felt as though only at that moment was she really setting out upon the great adventure. Unconsciously she tilted back her little head with a gesture almost of bravado; her lips closed in a line unexpectedly firm, and then, catching sight of her reflection in a window, she laughed suddenly aloud and thought, quite irrelevantly, "I do wish my nose was just the least bit bigger." Yet it was a very attractive little nose, with a slight turn upwards at the tip, and she knew that John did not share her wish.

She was forced to pass through into the next carriage and amused herself as she went along by glancing in at the occupants of the various compartments and rapidly summoning up a life-history of each of those who were by chance sharing with her a journey she could never forget. In one compartment were a group of men, two with

bovine faces studying newspapers, a third, a young man, lazily reading a novel with a startling wrapper, a fourth uneasily dozing. "How dull they look!" thought Cecilia, "and how wonderful life is!" In the next she had further cause for a comparison that favoured her own lot: it held three persons, a couple of elderly, exceedingly uninspiring ladies and a very fat old man. One of the ladies was steadily reading a book, the other was trying to, the old man was fast asleep with his mouth fallen uglily open and, as Cecilia came opposite, the heavy drone of his snoring rose above the noise of the train. The first lady took no heed, the second, raising her eyes, gave him a wasted look of acid indignation. Cecilia judged that she was the stranger and the other the wife: she passed on, congratulating herself upon her youth and determining that she and John would never fall into such indifferent decay. Old they would one day be, but old together and in harmony.

Cecilia was nearing the end of the second carriage and was about to pass the last compartment, a third-class, when her attention was arrested. In this were two travellers only, a woman poorly dressed, seemingly about thirty years of age, and a small boy of four or five. Cecilia hardly noticed the former as she drew level with the door of their compartment; all her mind was on the child, not on his face, but on his hair. Its colour drew her like a magnet; she had never before to her knowledge seen any of that exact shade—except on one

man, her husband. No, she was wrong : she had seen it on another on a single occasion and no less recently than that very afternoon. The recollection was no longer indefinite ; it leapt up sharply outlined. A big, gaunt, old man with a grizzled face and a short beard had stalked up to her early in the course of the reception after the wedding and informed her, gruffly but kindly, that he was her uncle. Before she had recovered from the swift surprise of the knowledge that in marrying John she had taken upon herself a host of new relations, he had added, with appreciation,

“ You haven’t seen me before, I know. Never come to London now if I can help it. I’m Uncle George : don’t forget. By Gad, but you’re a lucky young woman ! ”

He had passed on, feeling that he had now fulfilled all that could reasonably be expected of him and could go and drink a glass of champagne with one or two seldom-seen relations and then slip away back to the country : but he had not passed on unremembered. The brief adjuration to Cecilia not to forget had caused her to look at him with particularity : new relations were apt to be touchy and she would not fail John either now or in the future if she could help it. She had noted this new uncle : she was struck with the general resemblance in feature and build that even in age he bore to John, and, where his hair had not whitened, it was of the same dark russet tinge. She would have known him for a Harland anywhere.

She saw him again, she recalled her sudden thought now as she gazed at the little boy's hair. It was more than a recalling of thought, it was a re-creation. Her eyes, puzzled, travelled swiftly down from the little boy's head to his face: it was very singular, but his features confirmed the testimony of his hair. Little alike as her husband's strong, clearly-cut face was to the soft and chubby profile of a child, nevertheless there was a something which reminded her of John as she looked at the little boy. Just as John had been a few minutes before, leaning a little forward, his face almost in full profile to her as he dreamily watched the landscape, so now was this unknown child, looking at the darkening trees with the sleepy fixity of weariness. "It must be a relation," thought Cecilia; "but if he had been at the wedding I'm sure I should have noticed him. And he's not dressed up."

Her observation and her interest had been both the work of a second: Uncle George had come and gone in her thought before she had drawn quite level with the door of the compartment. Now she stopped and looked closely at the woman who sat opposite the child, wondering whether by chance she could identify her. The wonder passed immediately—she knew at a glance that she had never seen this woman before—but in passing it gave way to an interest much stronger. The woman was obviously no lady returning with her little son from a smart wedding: nor was she a

nurse in any household of the least importance. She was poor to shabbiness and she had about her that indefinable air of independent existence that is absent from even the most individual of domestics. The little boy too, as Cecilia had noted, was shabby.

Hardly had the look of the little boy and the general appearance of him and his companion presented themselves as a definite minor problem to Cecilia's mind before that deepened. A second glance at the woman showed that she was not only shabby but distressed. Beautiful she once had been, perhaps, at any rate well-featured; and in health and happiness, with rosy cheeks and smiling eyes, she had no doubt been possessed of considerable attraction. But these attributes had departed, and their disappearance had left her poor indeed. She was now white and thin, and in the solitude of the compartment, alone with the unnoticed child, she was struggling vainly with some sorrow. Her hands were clasped tightly together in her lap, and large tears were taking their slow unhindered course down her cheeks. It seemed to Cecilia a terrible thing to see them: it suggested that the woman was too sunk in her sorrow or in tiredness become too indifferent to trouble to wipe them away. Nor did Cecilia's pausing at the door cause either of the puzzling pair to move or notice her in any way.

Cecilia's heart went impulsively out to them. The likeness in the little boy that had first attracted her attention was interesting, even intriguing, but

it meant nothing : the distress in the woman was at discord with this most wonderful of journeys. It could not be silently passed by : if it lay in Cecilia's power to lighten it, it was both her duty and her privilege to exercise that power. No one could know quite such a sense of happiness as herself, but at least no one should be positively unhappy. She would go in and speak and, if she might, bring comfort.

For another second Cecilia stood poised : an unusual shyness invaded her. The two strangers were each in so different a way disconcertingly odd : the little boy was either tired out or exceptionally insensitive, both perhaps ; the woman was concentrated in a dreary self-abandonment. She gave Cecilia the curious impression of some one who had screwed herself up to a pitch beyond her normal strength or capacity, had met with disappointment or rejection, and was now facing the future like a receding tide. It seemed an impertinence to break in upon her and at any other moment of her life Cecilia would have passed on : but at that moment and with the intriguing little problem of the boy's resemblance before her she resisted what she felt to be a weakness, derogatory to her ideal of happiness. She would make use of her curiosity ; it should be the opening to her offer of service : she stepped boldly into the compartment, saying cheerily,

"Do forgive me, but your little boy's terribly like some one I know."

CHAPTER III

CECILIA had scarcely, by her motion no less than by her words, departed from those canons of reticent insensibility which normally govern those of the English race in face of a stranger's distress than she regretted so doing. As she entered the compartment and as she spoke she was visited by a sudden premonition, hardly definite enough to be felt as alarm and yet distinctly unpleasant.

It was not decreased by her reception. The woman looked up blankly and for a moment seemed hardly to understand that she was being spoken to. When this dawned upon her, causing her to pull herself out of her thoughts, her first expression was one of hostility: it was apparent that she objected to this unnecessary intrusion upon her at a moment when she was not merely sunk in melancholy but also on account of it lacking in attraction. She looked up at Cecilia with a quick aggressive defence that deepened into active aversion as she became definitely aware of the contrast she presented in her tear-stained, shabby slough of despond to the richly dressed, vital intruder. This attitude, however, passed as quickly as it had

arisen. Even as Cecilia, more and more conscious that she had been guilty of a familiarity that in conversely similar circumstances she herself would have resented, was framing in her thoughts a fitting apology and was about to withdraw, the woman's expression underwent a singular change. It seemed as though her mind had at first occupied itself with the unwelcome fact of being addressed by a complete stranger, had then concentrated upon the displeasing prosperity of the stranger, and had only as a third stage slowly addressed itself to the words that had actually been spoken. Her expression from hostility and distaste became frankly appreciative. It was odd, so the thought flashed across Cecilia, that in thus changing the woman seemed to her not more, but less, to be pitied. That she could not understand, and her sense of curiosity, always a lively feature in her, was stimulated into fresh activity. It was easy to understand the woman's first inclination to hostility; but now she was undeniably gratified, which was peculiar and a little disconcerting.

"That's one of the things I was counting on—if there was trouble," was the unexpected answer that came hesitatingly from the woman's lips. She had a voice displeasing to Cecilia's ear; it was both uneducated and also high-pitched with a nasal twang that located her source of origin, though for the moment it escaped Cecilia's attention.

"I—I'm not sure I quite understand," she answered. She was already seeking how best to

extricate herself from a position she found embarrassing, and yet it was strangely interesting. She wished at once to be gone and to understand.

"Come in, if you're coming," was the woman's ungracious response.

The little boy, who had hitherto paid no attention whatever to the visitor, now turned his head sleepily and stared with dubious indifference at Cecilia. It was the simplest of actions, one that she had been expecting, indeed one that she was surprised had not taken place at her first words, but it startled her. She had been sure, so she supposed, that a movement from profile, a clear glance at his face would dissipate the thought that was reaching out to her its shadowy fingers. It did not: the thought became a fear, irrational, indistinct, and yet irresistible. For a second she felt like flight: the unknown was always frightening. The next instant she repelled the feeling as cowardice—had she not been waging war all the journey against foolish fears, and had she not just succeeded in gaining the victory over them? She took a quick step into the compartment, drew the door to crisply behind her, and sat down—not opposite the little boy, but beside him, facing the odd, thin, distressed woman towards whom was arising in her, at variance with her first sympathies, a feeling of strong antipathy.

"What were you counting on? What's been the trouble?" she asked with a particularity for which she could in no way account.

"Everything;" the woman answered, dropping automatically into dolefulness under the atmosphere of a listener. "I wish we were back at home, I do."

"Have you far to go?"

"I don't mean to-night. I mean back in Canada."

Canada! What a strange word, even what a terrible word! Where had Cecilia heard it last? She could not remember, but she knew that it filled her with fear.

"Is that where you come from?" she asked with an effort at interest, struggling to suppress the oddity of her emotion.

"I come over with him," the woman nodded at the little boy. "Too late, just my luck."

"Too late to get work, d'you mean?"

"Work!" A world of contempt was in the woman's weary, dreary tone. "If I hadn't been too late, I'd have never had to work again. Too late by a day. It's damnable, that's what life is. By a day! If I could have got to him yesterday, it'd have been a very different story. Half a day: this morning'd have done. Just my luck!"

The tremors against which she was struggling began to tug Cecilia this way and that: she could hardly hear the self-pitying voice for the confusion, much less understand it. Before she could speak, before she even knew whether she wished to speak, the woman began again,

"Who could have guessed it? I started as

soon as ever I'd seen it and could get enough money. I ought to have been in plenty of time. Who'd have thought he'd have changed it to earlier? Got the wind up, I suppose; afraid I'd come along as I'd said I would. He knew me after all."

There was, in the midst of the self-pitying, a small triumphant gleam in the woman's eye: she squared her thin shoulders, and her lips, as she ended, came together. There was evidence in her now of a dour, if unreasoning, pertinacity to which her facile weeping had given no clue.

"Changed what? Who are you talking about?" Cecilia asked almost involuntarily, as the woman sat in momentary silence, contemplating her one small grain of satisfaction.

"His pa"; she nodded again at the solemn little boy.

"Hasn't he treated you well?" Cecilia asked the question, she did not know why. Her desire to escape was almost overwhelming, but it was beyond her power to break the uncanny bonds that were spreading like icicles upon her. She shivered, but could not rise.

The woman began to laugh, mirthlessly and without sound. The little boy who had sat indifferent to her tears was immediately affected: he put up one grubby hand and, screwing it hard into his eye, began to gulp.

Cecilia felt as though she were dead and that this was the waiting chamber of hell. Her nerves,

overwrought by all she had experienced in the last few hours, partially gave way. She put out a hand and, laying it almost roughly on the woman's knee, said with an austere decision of which she had not known herself capable,

"If you won't tell me what's your trouble, I can't help."

"I am telling you," answered the woman heavily, with some indignation: it was obvious that she spoke sincerely.

"You've told me nothing," rapped out Cecilia with asperity. "Why are you too late? What are you too late for?"

"The wedding."

Ah, what a chasm of difference could yawn between one hearing and another! The word that had for several weeks past been sounding in Cecilia's ears with such a beautiful, if strange, prophecy now fell on them with the agonizing thud of the fall of a murdered man. She gazed at the woman, numb, unable to speak.

"Yes," went on the wearily indignant tones, "I ought to have been here in plenty of time. Started as soon as ever I'd seen it, as I told you. There was a paragraph in the *Star* saying it was to take place in December; the third of December it said, as sure as anything—I can see it this very minute. So there wasn't any hurry: I could have got to him in London and seen him on the quiet. He'd have had to do something for the boy, wouldn't he, even if he was through with

me? I'm not one for making trouble, not more than's reasonable, I mean."

How break the recital, how end the torture? Cecilia strove to frame words, but her lips were too unsteady. The third of December! The day she was to have been married: she remembered with extreme vividness the provisional fixing and then the decision that there was no necessity to wait so long. What was the woman saying? The voice went on, self-absorbed, unconscious that her listener was stricken into stone—yet stone has no feeling and Cecilia was as one undergoing the old water-torment, when drop after drop fell upon the pinioned victim, always on the same spot, until the human frame could endure no more.

"Changed it to to-day, and I never had an inkling. I only got to London midday; there wasn't any hurry, as far as I knew. And then I had to get my lunch and see to him." Again the unnecessary, unemotional nod towards the little boy. "And then I got a paper to look for rooms, and then—then I came on it. Taking place that very minute! What was I to do, I ask you. Of course I could have gone along then and there, but what was the use? I couldn't have got to him without trouble, and I'd lost my best card, d'you see? I couldn't say I'd stop it; it was too late. Besides, it wouldn't somehow have been playing the game, if you follow me. Washing your dirty linen in public I don't hold by; and

that's what it would have meant. It'd have been playing it low down on her: I haven't got anything against her. She's all right as far as I know: I don't know anything about her except her name that I read in the paper. I didn't come over for that. I'm sorry for her, I am."

"Why?" The monosyllable came dryly out from between Cecilia's pallid lips. She had no further curiosity, she desired no more revelations; but she knew that unless she made some effort to shake off her terrible bondage she would break down altogether.

"Married to him," came the matter-of-fact answer. "She'll live to be mighty sore, if I know anything about him. Yes, I'm sorry for her. There's heaps who wouldn't be, in my place; but that's me. You can't help your feelings, can you?"

To be pitied, and by this woman—and for that which up to these last unbelievable moments had been the source of so much secret glory! It seemed to Cecilia that nothing on this earth could ever wash away the unspeakable degradation laid upon her. Her spirit, as it were, touched bottom and in the impact found at last the fervour of sheer despair. She had caught at all the strength of love as she went down into the depths and it had given way: strive as she would, she could not doubt. Not only were the woman's accents, by reason of their very dreariness, the accents of truth, not only could she have, on her own testimony and her

feeble sense of chivalry, no conceivable motive for invention, but there in the compartment, within fingers' reach of Cecilia, sat the little boy, unmistakably a Harland, a living embodiment of the destruction of all her dreams of happiness. She was beyond reasoning about degrees; she did not, she could not look upon this fact in the light of a judge, weighing and testing. It was not the past but the present that alone was the furnace into which she had been hurled. What had happened was one thing, lying between John and this woman; what was happening now was another, and in her anguish she felt it to be her sole concern.

She had not brought herself until this last and lowest layer of pity to speak the one question that must resolve all. It was needless, when she knew the answer—when she had known it, she horribly confessed to herself, from the first moment of the interview. And to speak it was to fling love naked to the storm, to be tossed for the rest of her life by all the winds of derision. But now she must speak it. Hateful, utterly hateful as it was—even as life had in reality been proved to be; it was only inexperienced fools of dreamers who for a moment found it wonderful—the question must be asked and answered, and then, all joy ended, all faith shattered, she could—but she could not feel or see beyond the agony of the instant.

“Who is it you’ve been speaking of? Who’s his father?” She shot out the words with sudden violence.

The woman was dragged from her absorption : for the first time since she had begun to talk she really looked at Cecilia. Curiosity, mingled with alarm, crept into her eyes as she perceived herself faced with a stranger, white, shivering, and staring fixedly at her with every indication of exceptional distaste.

"Don't know that that matters—now," she mumbled awkwardly, looking hastily away a moment only to resume her gaze again, more curious and more alarmed than before.

"Tell me. Who is it?" demanded Cecilia.

"What's it got to do with you?"

"It's Sir John Harland, isn't it?"

"Well——"

"Isn't it?"

"Yes." Assent was given grudgingly, forced out by the intensity of the questioner.

Cecilia heard the word and yet seemed hardly to have heard it. She gave no sign at all that it had pierced like a jagged sword.

To know that you know as long as that knowledge, however deeply engraved upon the heart, can yet be termed self-created, self-acquired, still leaves room for the tiny grain of doubt that is sufficient to sustain : to have the same knowledge corroborated is to die a hundred deaths.

"Why d'you ask? D'you know him?" The woman half rose from her seat in her curiosity, alarm, and surprise.

With a reckless laugh Cecilia leant forward and

pushed her down. Then she sprang to her own feet unsteadily, and cried in answer,

"I don't know why I asked. No, I don't know him; I thought I did. I don't."

"Who are you?" stuttered the woman.

"I am—I was his——" Cecilia could not finish: the intended word choked her. With a feverish gesture she flung open the door of the compartment and rushed blindly up the corridor, with one thought alone pulsing in her brain, to escape somehow, somewhere so that she could never be found again.

CHAPTER IV

CECILIA was through into the third carriage from the one in which she had left her husband before the surprised exclamation of the woman who had been the cause of such revelation had fully died away. She hurried on, fearful of being caught and questioned, seeking escape. For an instant she fell into a panic lest she had been already absent so long from her own compartment that John might even now be passed from uneasy wonder into investigation ; but her watch reassured her. She could hardly hold her wrist steady enough for her eyes to rest with certainty upon the hands, yet she took in the time sufficiently to understand with a most bitter throb that the experience which had seemed so long and the effects of which must be enduring had in fact occupied only a few minutes : how little time it takes to spoil a life, was the thought that ran inconsequently through her mind, less than the ending of the day in night !

As she went breathlessly along, she saw from an open window that the dusk had now settled sombrely down, but as she glanced out she saw something of yet greater interest : a light in a

cottage window close to the line swung past her—slowly; then all the external world was again a darkness with the occasional blur of bushes and the dim tracery of trees. She could not understand it: why had the light taken so long to come and go? Then it came home to her in her vast agitation of mind that she was no longer finding it necessary, as she moved, to steady herself along the corridor. The train was slowing up. Was she then near the one town at which it was to stop before the destination for which she had set out? That did not seem to be so: a further hasty glance out showed her that the light had been not the forerunner of many, but an isolated gleam: the train was still in the depths of the country. But it was unquestionably slowing.

So far had Cecilia's perception reached when she became aware that a few compartments ahead of her a ticket-inspector was on his tour of duty down the train: he was standing half in and half out of a door and in another moment would be out again in the corridor blocking her progress. Cecilia was passed much beyond reasoning or calculation: she acted on the impulse born of the simultaneousness of the two new impressions. She could not fling herself from the speeding train: even in flight, she was no coward, and escape by suicide never entered her mind. But escape she must—and equally she must avert any search for her: these were the two halves of her single impulse, and now her opportunity was before her.

At one and the same moment the train was slowing, even, it might be, stopping, and in front of her stood some one who could bear a message to the man seated in unconscious security three carriages to the rear. Hardly had Cecilia's mind flung itself out in obedience to her impulse before decision was definitely demanded of her. The inspector, having finished with the compartment in which he had been occupied, returned to the corridor just ahead of her. Seeing a lady apparently desiring to pass, he flattened himself politely against the side to give her room.

She did not pass. Instead she said to him—and in this crisis of her fate a terrible calmness momentarily took possession of her—"I've a favour to ask, inspector. There's a gentleman by himself in a first-class, two or three carriages back. Will you give him a note for me?"

In her pallor and tensity Cecilia had about her a singular attraction: the inspector scented romance immediately and became paternal as befitted his seniority; he assented with a ready grace.

"After the next stop—not before. Promise: it's—it's very important." Cecilia tugged open the hand-bag dangling on her wrist and felt for a pencil and scrap of paper.

"After the next stop—very good, miss. You leave it to me."

"I'm ever so much obliged."

Cecilia drew out a note that had been thrust into her hand by a sentimental girl-friend just as


she was leaving for the station and tore off the blank half-sheet. The inspector produced a pencil and watched her return of agitation with amiability. She scribbled a few lines, hardly knowing what she wrote and fearfully conscious of his gaze and his interest born of erroneous impression, then folded the note tightly and with a trembling hand wrote her husband's name—for the last time, she thought.

She renewed her instruction and thanks and the inspector renewed his promise: he drew aside a second time; she continued her swift passage up the train, the agitation that she had for the moment so successfully suppressed regaining control of her with every further step.

A few seconds more and she was round the corner of the corridor and through into the fourth carriage, out of sight of the inspector, alone with her whirling impulse. A long slow grating of wheels, followed by a slight jerk, after which arose on the night air the stertorous puffing of the engine, told her that momentarily at any rate the train had come to a standstill. Beyond that realization she did not reflect. She took two steps to the nearest door in the corridor, let down the window as though to look out and discover the cause of the stoppage, leant out, grasped the handle, turned it, slipped through the opening and immediately closed the door behind her. So quick and deft had been her movements that she felt certain they had passed quite unnoticed. The next moment

she sprang down from the footboard: there was one crunch of the gravel as she alighted and then she was on the grass by the line, over the wooden paling and cowering, lost to sight and sound, among the rhododendrons at the edge of a little coppice.

Before she had in any degree regained her self-possession, a signal along the line clicked, the great engine, not twenty yards away, whistled and gave forth a series of heavy puffs, the train jerked, the couplings banged lightly, the puffs ran together, the wheels quickened, the line of lights began to flicker, the long train lumbered on its resumed way. As it gathered speed, Cecilia saw clearly silhouetted against the window of an otherwise empty compartment the man she had married that afternoon and now had left irrevocably. The sight and the thought were like two remorseless, unanticipated blows: she sprang to the paling wildly and cried aloud she knew not what. The wind of the train bore away the sound mockingly: the lines thrilled mysteriously into silence. She was left to solitude and the drear stillness of the November night.



CHAPTER V

JOHAN HARLAND sat on in his compartment after Cecilia had left him, hardly conscious that he was alone. His eyes followed her as she hurriedly sprang up and passed into the corridor : when she had gone from his sight he still continued to watch the corner of the window through which her image had last come to him. Then he drew a long breath, expelling the air again suddenly, and a smile came into his eyes and touched the corners of his lips. Its effect was as a little puff of wind rippling over a field of barley ; where all had seemed heavy of purpose and formal, it was on the instant alive and full of attraction. Several years seemed to drop from him : the slight graying of the dark russet hair on his temples no longer possessed significance.

He turned from the useless contemplation of the corridor back to the further window : the smile died quietly out of his eyes and was replaced by the absent look of casual observation of the dusky shapes that loomed up in the hedgerows and the indistinct flatness of the fields ; his mouth set again, not into actual sternness but into a fixity of thought that gave a suggestion of sternness. The

light from the lamp shone down upon him as he leant back and strengthened the strongly chiselled lines of his face. He had the fresh appearance of splendid health enjoyed in the open air and the marks of resolution as of one whose lot in life had been to command or at the least decide and had assumed the lot with an easy, almost a careless, strength. Seated in abstraction, he looked as though he were one who had not lost the power to dream, and yet would never allow dreams to domineer over his life or thwart his practical plans.

For many minutes he sat, a man who had reached his goal, so busily surrounded by his thoughts that Cecilia's absence did not penetrate. The train slowed and he paid no heed: it stopped with a slight jerk and he gave no mind to it. Before the stoppage had lasted long enough to deserve his attention, it was ended; the train was again in motion and he was gazing out with ignorant indifference at the blurred outline of the little cop-pice from the edge of which Cecilia was about to spring so wildly. A moment or two later a ticket inspector interrupted him, gave him a shrewd look, seemed about to speak, but thought better of it, nodded his head knowingly at the sight of the two tickets produced, clipped them and passed on, curious but true to his promise. John Harland had turned with a quick look of welcome at the sound of the door being pushed back: this died on his expressive face as he saw the official. He produced the tickets in silence, knowing the times and

details of the journey too thoroughly to need to ask any question and having no wish on such an afternoon for casual conversation.

Presently lights in the darkened countryside began to glimmer in clusters ; the train jolted half-irritably over some points, and then ran smoothly into Dorminster Junction, the one station at which it was scheduled to stop before the destination of the sundered travellers. The change of outlook changed John Harland's thoughts : he sat up, glanced around, and then looked at his watch with a slight expression of surprise.

"She's a long time," he muttered. Then again the same quick, elusive smile revisited his eyes and the corners of his mouth. He remembered he had taken no note of the time at which Cecilia had left the compartment and reminded himself amusedly that he was at a stage of his life when a few moments would naturally seem an hour. His thoughts went back to her as she had been in that abrupt departure ; and the smile deepened insensibly. He understood, or thought he understood ; he was not by any means convinced that he was himself nearly as much at ease as he pretended. She was desperately, beautifully diffident ; he wondered whether that were a phase or an integral part of her. There was much about her yet of which he would have the slow and lovely learning.

The compartment was specially reserved ; he had seen to that. And travellers late in the cold of a November evening were few. Nobody made

any attempt to join him in his solitude: he sank back with a sigh of happy anticipation as the long train slowly got under way again—in another minute Cecilia, fresh and glowing, would rejoin him, not to be separated from him again till he left her for his dressing-room after they had actually arrived, man and wife together, at their hotel.

When the train was once more at full speed and still he remained companionless, he was puzzled. He glanced again uneasily at his watch, shook it slightly to make certain that it at any rate was not playing tricks with him and then, getting up from his seat, paced the compartment a moment or two with a queer little sense of disquietude. He looked into the corridor; it was empty. He was still looking down it uncertainly in the direction in which Cecilia had disappeared when the ticket inspector turned into it again from behind him: John Harland did not hear his approach and when the inspector lightly touched him on the shoulder he drew aside automatically to let the stranger pass.

“Are you Sir John Harland, sir?”

“Yes. Why?” The two monosyllables came out quickly in some surprise.

“I thought so, sir: but I had to make sure. This is for you then, sir.” The inspector held out a hurriedly folded half-sheet of paper. John Harland’s gaze rested on it uncomprehendingly with a return of the queer little stab of disquietude: he stretched out his hand for it slowly, saying with vagueness, “For me?”

"Yes, sir. Young lady gave it me to give you."

"Young lady——" Harland was beginning in repetitive astonishment. Though he could not have voiced the thought, he was suddenly conscious to an acute degree of the unusual, if not of the terrible. He stopped his words sharply and looked down at the note that the inspector pushed into his hand.

"Yes, sir ; asked me to give it you after the next stop. Very particular she was ; not before, she said."

"I understand," murmured Harland, not understanding in the slightest, but obsessed by a horrid sensation that he must say something. Then with a forcible effort of will he pulled himself out of his stupor, raised the note, tore it abruptly open, and read it.

The inspector, watching him with a curiosity much increased by the realization that whatever the note may have been to the writer it was no comedy for the reader, saw his whole body stiffen with a jerk, his lips come together so firmly that they went white, the muscles of his jaws bulge tensely, his eyes stare and stare at the crumpled half-sheet of paper, but heard not a sound of any sort except an intake of the breath through extended nostrils.

"Nothing wrong, sir, I suppose ?" queried the inspector after waiting for what seemed to be many seconds for enlightenment without any change or result.

"Where did you get this ?" The question was

asked in a slow, low voice, a sound dribbled out from behind tightly jammed barriers.

"In the corridor, sir; three carriages forward. Young lady——"

"Yes, yes. I know about her. When did you get it?"

"When?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, let me see, just before we got to Dorminster. After the next stop, she said; not before, remember."

"Before we got to Dorminster? Are you sure?"

"Why, yes, sir; of course I am."

"Then what in hell's name has——" Harland's question, beginning in dark bewilderment, trailed off into indistinctness: he transferred his stare from the paper to the inspector, and, gazing at him with a wildness he could not wholly stifle, said sharply,

"What was she doing?"

"She was in the corridor, sir: just going along, you know. After the next stop, she said. And I've kept my word, haven't I?"

"Have you?" The two words came out with a curt and utter indifference to the inspector except as an actor in an unbelievable drama.

"You mean—— Oh, but that was nothing; she meant after Dorminster, of course."

"Did she?"

"Of course she did. She wouldn't know or think

of a signal against us—not once in a hundred times do we stop on this run before Dorminster——”

“What the devil are you talking about?” Harland’s tones cut across the inspector’s musing like an axe. “In the corridor? Where? When?”

“I can’t help you any more, sir. I said I’d give you the note and I have. That’s all I know about it.” The inspector perceived that he was being made responsible for something of which he had no knowledge and over which he could have exercised no control, and he resented the imputation. He started to back away, leaving John Harland staring again with incredulous eyes at the half-sheet in his trembling hand:—

“I can’t go on with this. I’ve seen your son and his mother. Oh, why, why didn’t you tell me? Good-bye. C.”

“In the corridor—three carriages forward—after the next stop.” The phrases of the inspector rang like hammers on his brain: what could they mean? Where was Cecilia? Why didn’t she come back?

As he asked himself these three questions, he suddenly awoke to the realization that the one man who could tell him something more was in the act of leaving him. Instantly he hurled himself out of his compartment, darted after the inspector and caught him by the sleeve.

“No, you don’t!” he exclaimed. “You can’t clear out like that.”

"It's nothing to do with me, sir," expostulated the inspector with some indignation.

"Of course it isn't : I'm not accusing you. It's to do with me, and it's vital, vital, d'you understand ? I want you to tell me exactly when she gave you this, and show me where. Come along : I'll make it worth your while !" With overmastering impatience he dragged at the inspector's coat-sleeve as he spoke.

The latter, mollified and intrigued, assented without hesitation. The two men walked swiftly along the corridor of the train, the inspector saying, "It was seven minutes before we got to Dorminster, just before we were stopped a moment. I noted the time particularly ; second nature, as you might say."

John Harland hardly heard him : his mind had passed from the inspector's phrases to the words of the note : they stood out in front of his eyes like letters of fire : 'your son and his mother.' Was he dead that the earth should crash so madly about his feet ? With his temples throbbing, he walked along in front of the inspector, darting glances of swift inquiry, like stabs, into every compartment past which they went. He was level with the last compartment of the second carriage before his spasm of tormented energy gave out : at that point, glancing into it, he checked his stride abruptly.

"Not here, sir," spoke the inspector behind him, "a little further on—in the next carriage."

"Go away," answered Harland jerkily: he thrust out his hand behind him and passed the inspector a five-pound note. "I may want you later. Go away now."

Surprised but complaisant, the inspector pocketed the note and obeyed, leaving Harland staring in at the compartment. He saw, first, a shabby, indignant woman of about thirty who returned his gaze with a hostility at least equal to his, and, secondly, seated opposite to her, moodily munching a bun, a small boy of four or five, with dark russet hair the exact shade of his own.

For a long moment he stared fixedly at the little boy, heedless of the gesture of dismissal angrily flung at him by the woman within: then, with a long, quivering gasp as of a man confronted irremediably by a plunge into an icy sea, he drew aside the door very quietly and went in.

CHAPTER VI

THE seconds beat heavily down upon Cecilia as her eyes watched the tail-light of the train dwindle to a speck and then suddenly disappear and as her ears listened to the long echoing back that was cut short at length by the interposition of a bank as the train rounded a distant corner. Not till then did she gain any direct consciousness of the situation in which she had so impulsively placed herself. She came up, as it were, out of the surging waters of disillusionment to find herself leaning over a paling beside a railway line, in solitude, darkness, and cold. Behind her was the confused blackness of a big clump of rhododendrons standing at the edge of a coppice: on either side of her in front stretched the now silent dimness of the track. There was no wind and not a sound. She was in the depths of the country and, except only that she had understood from her journey that in a few minutes more she would have been borne, had she remained in the train, into the station at Dorminster Junction, she had not the remotest idea where she now stood. She was entirely without luggage and had not acted upon the formulation of any plan.

So much gradually came home to her as she stood. She shivered and clutched her coat closely around her. She had that at least and was relieved: not only would she not take cold but it was a notable emblem of respectability. It was her husband's gift—how unbelievable already that seemed—a magnificent sable coat that had lapped her round, so she had felt when she first had slipped it on, like the warm strength of his love. Now in circumstances so altered she would not of course retain it: she would send it back somehow as soon as she could find means to do so without giving any indication or clue as to herself—on that already she was adamant. For the present she would keep it and in grateful recognition of its material comfort ignore the stab of its origin.

That point settled, she gathered her mind resolutely upon the present. The past could wait; there was no fear of its being mislaid, it would be a part of her painfully as long as she lived: the future could be met as it came. Where was she now? That was the first question to be resolved. But hardly had she begun seriously to ask it of herself before a second leapt to her mind. How was she to account for herself when she did discover where she was?

These two questions began to toss about noisily in her ears and out of the agitation was immediately born a third: when she had discovered where she was and had accounted for being there, what was she to do for food and lodging? Hardly had she

prepared for herself this test of her impulsive flight, hardly had she begun to wonder whether, even if she had known it meant starvation, she would still have acted similarly under the shock of disenchantment, before she gave a sudden little cry of recollection. She had left the train for an unlocated spot in darkness without luggage and with only the clothes in which she stood, but by a happy circumstance she was not penniless. She had had one sharply outlined recollection of an incident in her afternoon, after her wedding and before her departure, the vision of her new Uncle George that had driven irrecoverably into her mind the certainty that the little unknown boy was a Harland: now she had a second.

To her, as she still stood pale in the darkness by the track, came another new relation, one of the many of this large and wealthy family that had that afternoon—for so short a time—claimed her for its own. Just as she was departing, a moment before her sentimental friend had given her that gushing farewell note, one half of which had wrought such a change in John Harland, she had been stopped by a queer, little, eccentric figure in a short-waisted bottle-green dress and a little poke bonnet—Aunt Emily—of whom she had already heard as ‘queer and dear and terribly rich now she’s a widow: never had a penny to spend before.’ What had Aunt Emily said? The dry quaver of the old voice, whispering in her ear, reached her afresh out of the darkness:—“Put this in your

pocket, my dear : I know what it is having to ask for everything. It's bad enough always ; but on your honeymoon it's hateful. Don't spoil him, and have a happy time." And, as she had whispered, ' Aunt Emily ' had pushed an envelope into her hand. Cecilia had thrust it into her new hand-bag, just as she did a moment later her friend's note, and both had passed immediately out of mind : material things were of the least importance possible. But at the station, needing a handkerchief, she had noticed the envelope in her bag, and remembered it sufficiently to take a casual glance inside ; she had seen that it contained some notes, and murmuring to herself ' What a kind old dear ! ' had forgotten it. Now once more it was vivid in her mind : she had seen it again as she felt for the note to scribble those few terrible words of good-bye to her husband : it was in the bag that dangled on her wrist now in the darkness.

Cecilia was in the dark, in unknown country, and alone : but the night was clear, she was warmly clothed, and she had money—how much she did not know, but enough for a night's lodging at the very least. She had not placed herself in desperate straits by her flight. Though the cause of that flight remained, though her whole being felt raw, this chance was at any rate so much better than it might have been that insensibly her spirits were less weighed down within her. She felt still like a creature that had been trapped and caged and had managed to break out, but now like one

that had its cunning to trust to worthily to avoid recapture.

She shivered again, though not with cold, like a high-spirited animal before a race, and abandoned thought for action. One glance around was sufficient to assure her that, though the country stretched in its silent darkness on all sides of her, her choice of route was strictly limited. To endeavour to make her way through the coppice or across the fields was unthinkable ; she would arrive nowhere and would probably break her leg, if not her neck : she must take to the line, the track of which she could dimly make out, until that led her to a road or lane. She must go either to the left or to the right, so much was decided for her. Which should she choose ? It seemed immaterial, but there was this difference between the two directions, that to the left led her back through the still, untroubled country through which she had been borne in the train and that to the right led onward towards Dorminster Junction : by her hurried reckoning she was still some miles from that and need have no fear, if she went in that direction, of running straight into a zone of inquiry, and it was probable that at no great distance houses, or at any rate cottages, would begin. There was but one disadvantage in proceeding to the right, namely, that a hundred paces or so ahead loomed faintly the light of the signal-box that had played its brief part in the tragedy of her marriage : she had no wish to be stopped or questioned. It seemed hardly probable,

however, that she would run any serious risk of either—and ordinary risks she must quickly learn in these novel circumstances and surroundings to face with equanimity. Cecilia decided to move to the right and steal past the signal-box.

Movement proved more difficult than she expected. To step accurately from sleeper to sleeper was not easy, and not to step from sleeper to sleeper was far from comfortable. Cecilia tripped and stumbled along some fifty or sixty yards and was just beginning to get into the way of it when the door of the signal-box was flung open and what seemed by contrast to be a great sword-shaft of light leapt from it up the line. Cecilia thought herself discovered and in quick trepidation spun round, caught her foot, and fell. She picked herself up in an instant, and turned and fled with rapidity and fortunate precision of foot-step away from the signal-box up the line ; but out of the night came a startled volley of questions, succeeded by some profanity as voicelessly the intruding vision scurried away.

Cecilia was seriously alarmed : she felt sure that she would be pursued, caught, and questioned. She was vaguely aware that trespassing on a railway line was an offence, but that was not what alarmed her ; that could probably be settled by the payment of a fine ; what was serious was that she could hardly hope to be allowed to depart without satisfying her captor's curiosity. With the utmost speed of which she was capable she fled along the line

until her breath was coming in great gasps and all pursuit seemed momentarily to have died away. But she could not trust to its relinquishment: she dropped to a walk but still proceeded rapidly, searching the outlying darkness anxiously for a break that should signify a road. The track seemed to stretch endlessly before her; she grew hot and weary and despairing. How futile it all was! Her wedding evening—impossible! The thought, however, stimulated her; incongruously it touched the submerged strength of her sense of humour. Wryly, and yet genuinely, laughter was forced out of her lips. And at that moment she came to a gateway, looming palely on either side of the track.

Difficult as her way would be if she attempted the country, she would be safer off the railway line: peering with all her power, Cecilia could make out that, though she was still among fields, yet the path on the side of the gate was sufficiently marked to be followed. She slipped over in a moment and melted into the security of the field. It was strangely warm and comforting, but it was also extremely dark: she had to pick her way with great care to avoid losing all sense of the path, which was hardly more than a line of cart-ruts leading across—she hoped—to a road. She was mistaken: after following them a great way, so it appeared at least, she was brought to another gate. This had the merit of standing open to set against the much greater demerit of being flanked on either side by mud. Cecilia was now reckless: she went

on, avoiding what she could, passing through what she must. Cattle snorted near her and more than once dark shapes rose lumberingly to their feet and seemed to menace her passage. She held on her way with a growing sense of desperation, and was at last rewarded. The cart-ruts led down to a further gate and this opened on to a lane. It was intensely dark in the lane ; only by looking upwards to the sky could Cecilia progress : the moment she looked down she was into one of the flanking hedges. It seemed a century before there was any change in the world, and she was beginning to fancy herself a disembodied spirit moving in unreality when the lane debouched into a small road, hard-metalled to the feet and less opaque to the eye.

Still there were no lights, no sounds or other evidences of neighbouring humanity : knitting her brows, closing her lips together tightly, Cecilia set off along the road. It was a night of beauty, clear and very cold : the air came frostily against her face, adding to the unreality. Against the sky stood out boldly the rich traceries of the flanking elms and the blobby strength of a group of tall pines. On another occasion Cecilia would have drawn in deep breaths rejoicingly and noted with rapture the outlined beauty : it was just such an hour as ordinarily she most loved. Now she toiled on, unnoticing. She was weary, she was muddy, she was increasingly conscious of hunger : all mental sensations were yielding place to physical distress.

Cecilia had plodded along dourly for many minutes and had already passed beyond the conclusion that she had turned into the longest, loneliest highway in Europe when, on rounding a corner, she came suddenly and without preparation upon her fellow-mortals. Standing by a gate that led downward to a group of farm buildings were a couple of men, one leaning over a bicycle as he exchanged parting words with the other. In the darkness Cecilia could make out little except that they were apparently labourers: she had instantly to decide whether to speak or pass and, utterly weary of her lost and homeless state, spoke on the impulse without giving thought to the oddity of her unexplained appearance.

“Can you tell me where I am, please, and where I can get shelter for to-night?”

The slow colloquy had already broken off at her approach; at her words there was a puzzled silence. She broke it impatiently.

“Is that a farm down there?”

It was impossible to deny it and no great danger could reasonably be apprehended from the admission: but at the same time it would not be wise to be too explicit. Cecilia therefore received no more than a non-committal sound in the throat of the nearest man that might have signified equally dissent as assent and could not be reduced to spelling in any language.

“Where am I?” repeated Cecilia with irritation.

“Little Pedlington it be, miss—leastways——”

"I've lost my way," she cut in decisively. "Can I get a room and food?"

This direct and reiterated question obviously produced deep doubt, even suspicion. The yokel with the bicycle who had not spoken continued to stare open-mouthed: the other pushed his hat well back and scratched his head in grievous perplexity. Cecilia with difficulty restrained her impetuous desire to strike them both into life with blows.

"You'll have to ask t' missus," at last spoke the man nearest to her. "I doant fairly know."

"Down there?"

"Aye."

Indignant and acutely conscious of her plight, Cecilia waited for no more. She whirled on her heel, pushed past the two bewildered men and walked swiftly down to the farm, cudgelling her weary brain energetically to the inevitable task of trying to explain herself reasonably to unimaginative, suspicious strangers.

The farmer's wife who came to her knockings was as slow-minded and as puzzled as the two men in the road, but at the door Cecilia had the aid of the lamp-beams which removed her immediately from the category of the improvident vagrant. She was invited in with curiosity and sank into a chair in the warm, lighted kitchen with an extraordinary sense of relief.

She began wearily to invent or rather to adapt—the flights of pure invention were by this time quite beyond her. She explained that she had been

travelling and had got out of 'the car'; by some mistake it had gone on without her. She had lost her way in the dark; she had no idea where she was; all she asked was food and shelter for the night; she could pay. The whole story sounded to her, as she heard her voice uttering it, incredibly thin; but what did it matter? Some degree of suspicion she could not avoid, but as long as it was not so great as to cause her eviction she did not care.

The farmer's wife was curious but without the intelligence to question shrewdly; her husband, who lumbered in after finishing his interrupted colloquy at the gate, was more intelligent, but less interested. There was a room—not over comfortable and as stuffy as a window, long and tightly fastened, could keep it—but a room adequate for rest: there was food—not delicate or varied, but abundant, its one drawback being that it was not possible to obtain it either in silence or in solitude. But at last, battered by the surmises and commiserations of the farmer's wife and embarrassed by the abysmally stolid stare of the farmer, Cecilia could rise from her meal and seek her room and her rest.

Into the first, by flinging back the window after a struggle, she could let the cool serenity of the night: the second, without a struggle, came unexpectedly to her rescue. So weary she was, both in mind and body, that for all the strangeness of situation and even of garment and for all the

devastation of her happiness she fell asleep in the youth of her twenty-three years before she had taken advantage of her solitude to dwell upon the whirligig of the past few hours or to plan the course of those immediately to come.

CHAPTER VII

TO those who have not merely youthfulness of years but the greater gift of the spirit of youth within them to awake is always an adventure ; and, when the awakening is in a strange room, then it is clothed in a glamour which, however transient, is yet real : a new day has been begun in new surroundings, and to novelty everything is possible.

Cecilia was awakened in the chilly dimness of a November dawn by the many sounds of the resumption of life upon a farm. A cock crowed with astonishing verve, fowls began a clucking which was both melodious and melancholy, dogs barked, heavy boots passed clatteringly along below her window, slow voices were raised in exhortation and command. For a few seconds she lay without realization, then memory came flooding her ; she sat up in bed suddenly, with all the turmoil and cataclysm of the past few hours vividly before her. It was the garment in which she found herself even more than the room in which she lay that brought to her most acutely the consciousness of an adventure : instead of any of the delicate softnesses that she had bought so recently with such a feeling of diffident unreality she had upon her the coarse, stiff night-

gown which was all she had been able to borrow to enable her to undress. Misery, disillusion, a sense of waste and distress crowded upon her as her thoughts rushed to the man she had married and left, the husband who had sprung up to crown her world and had crashed almost within the hour—that was inevitable, and with a fierce little twisting of her shoulders Cecilia accepted the destruction and fought against self-pity: for assistance in that fight she clutched, as a most incongruous ally, the stiff, uncomfortable night-gown. That she should ever find herself so clothed! That was a cause for astonishment first, and then for humour: let her extract humour from whatever source she could, there was likely to be little of it left in life for her now. She examined the ugly garment with interest, fixing her mind deliberately upon a brief attempt to visualize the circumstances of its habitual owner.

It was a gallant attempt, but foredoomed: it was not possible for her by any such conscious device to postpone for more than a few seconds the problems of reality that were merely waiting for her complete wakefulness to arise and harass her. She had taken her fate boldly, suddenly, and decisively into her own hands: acting on an impulse that at the moment had seemed to be quite uncontrollable, she had taken a step that was clearly beyond redemption. She had severed herself hastily, even dramatically, from her husband: that was an act which could never be explained away or amended; it was done and must be accepted. It was no use

now, in such circumstances, she told herself with fiery resolution, to go back on the question, whether she had been right or wrong, wise or foolish, to yield to her impulse ; she had yielded, and it was with the consequences alone that she was now concerned. It was no use torturing herself by contrasting the idealism with which she had clothed her maiden dreams with the reality that had emerged, or contrasting the man she had thought she was marrying and the man she had found him to have been—all that merely brought pain and intense depression. She had awakened to a new day, in a strange place, without fellowship : it was with that, and that alone, that she must grapple. She must take hold of the newness with both hands, and out of it build a citadel or lose herself feebly in the waves of cowardice that were greedily at hand to envelop her.

She lay down in bed again, snuggling in the coarse sheets as best she could against the November cold, and with all her courage and with the special resilience of her youth set herself to think forwards and not to cast unavailing eyes at the lacerated hopes behind her. What was she to do ! Sneak back to London as though the ceremony of yesterday had never taken place ? That was hardly the answer. Not only was there no particular reason for such a return, no home or relations to receive her, but the revisitation of any of her former haunts would be the surest way to discover herself again to her husband. Unconsciously she adopted

that last magic word in her thoughts, and then on the realization revoked it with deliberation: she had no husband; she was that oddity of any social structure, a married woman and yet neither widow nor wife. She must not make use of the word 'husband': it must die in her thoughts as it had died in her life—let her say to herself simply, that if she returned to the places and ways that had known her she would inevitably be found by Sir John Harland. If he sought for her, that was; but would he? That was a question Cecilia was wholly unprepared to answer: she did not know, she could not create in her imagination a vision of his reception of the fact that she had slipped out of his life. And it was of no avail to think of it: it was only pain. Such a thought could do nothing but weaken her in the course that lay before her.

When Cecilia had travelled thus far in her mind she realized that, great as the distance seemed, she had in fact advanced but little to a conclusion. She had settled that she could not, or at any rate she would not, return to London: that was of immense importance since it settled at a stroke that she was determined definitely to dissociate her future from her past, but it was nevertheless a negative decision. Having made it, she realized more poignantly than ever before in her life, even than in the days immediately following her father's death, how utterly alone and friendless in the world she was. However heart-sickening, it was literally true that, excluding John Harland and all the many relations

and friends who derived from him and were now accordingly equally removed from her, there was not one person left on earth to whom she really mattered and in whom, in her sudden tragic isolation, she could trustfully confide. She thought of the girl who had thrust the note into her hands : was either of them of any real importance to the other ? A little sentiment, nothing more. The girl was as little to her as she was quite sure she was to the girl. And that was her nearest and dearest !

She had flung away, then, everything by her act of violent impulse—love, friends, wealth, all were irretrievably lost to her. Did she regret it ? The necessity, yes, but not the reaction to the necessity. With a fierceness of animation that was oddly incongruous with the chill lifelessness of the darkened room, she told herself that, were it to do again, she would do it without the slightest hesitation. She had acted inevitably, strictly in accordance with the height of her ideals. Nor had she lost love by her act—not real love : that could never have been in her possession as she had supposed it to have been. She had been an ignorant wanderer in a paradise of dream : she had awoken to the wilderness of reality, and from her eyes the illusion had finally been reft. She was sure John Harland had thought that he loved her ; but now she was equally sure that he had been without knowledge of what love really meant. She was a new possession, prized as such, as that woman with the little boy once had been : it was an intolerable recollection.

She stirred sharply with all the weight of her unhappiness returned upon her, then once again by an effort of will cast it behind her. She must never look back : memory was synonymous with pain : she must go forward, re-creating her life from that hour as though she were born again. The one great reason compelled and all the minor circumstances conspired to assist. She had given up the rooms that had shared the briefly flowering beauty of her joy ; she had resigned her appointment and her humble place was filled. There was nothing and no one to claim or need her return. There were some few little personal possessions she would miss, but they alone could not suffice to recall her. She would go forward as stoutly as she could into the unknown : whatever befell her, it could not be worse than the calamity that had overtaken her already.

Having so concluded, Cecilia felt less overwhelmed. The daylight was strengthening, a thin shaft of frosty light was slowly elongating itself upon the wall, the world around her had long been active. She, it appeared, the unknown wanderer into the unknown, was forgotten in the more immediate, normal necessities of farm labour : no matter, she must find it as natural to be forgotten as it had been since her father's death and before the short interlude of her importance. Even if she were in fact Lady Harland, she was of no greater consequence than if she had never ceased to be Miss Brooke. Since the fact was based upon illusion, it

had better cease to be recognized as fact : it was at least equally true that she had not in reality ever ceased to be Miss Brooke. She would be herself again : she was plunging into the unknown ; it could matter to no one but herself. She worked first her engagement-ring and then her wedding-ring off her finger with energy, and sprang out of bed, once more Cecilia Brooke.


She unlatched the blind, which flew up suddenly to reveal to her the new world. It was a cold world with the white frost on the roof of the barn opposite and in the depressions of the hummocky field beyond, but it was not an unpleasant world. The pale sun was doing its best in its first hour of light to beautify and invigorate : sounds rang in the still air with a crisp distinctness ; branches, bare of leaves and motionless, made attractive designs of tracery against the sky ; and the air was clean—to the lungs of one long accustomed to London quite astonishingly refreshing. To the wreck of all her affections Cecilia no longer added weariness of body : she ached in unusual places from the hardness of the bed, but she felt physically renewed and ready for the battle that life must henceforth be.

She closed her window, conscious at last that she was growing cold standing at it staring out upon the farmyard and the fields, and turned to her dressing-table. On it, carelessly laid down with the utter weariness with which she had come to bed, lay her little hand-bag : for the first time since her dropping from the train Cecilia felt sufficiently

face to face with realities to have a keen curiosity as to the extent of her resources. Some notes, so much alone she remembered: what had Aunt Emily ('terribly rich now she's a widow, never had a penny to spend before,') thought a reasonable sum to present to her new niece in so eccentric and yet so kind a way? The answer to the question suddenly assumed amazingly large proportions: Cecilia, who had almost felt a while before as though nothing could ever matter to her again, grew quite excited as she seized and opened the bag. She could scarcely restrain a rueful smile as she remembered how casually she had glanced inside the envelope at the station: did the value of money increase as all other values fell? It was a humiliating reflection. The crackle of notes switched her mind from philosophy: she drew out of the envelope a thicker bundle than she had imagined it contained. Five-pound notes, and quite a number of them. She counted rapidly—twenty: that made a hundred pounds! Why—it was a fortune! How odd it was to be so rich now, at a time when she was so absolutely destitute in respect of all that mattered! Cecilia's standards of wealth had had no time to be assimilated to those of the Harlands: as a Brooke she had always been poor. A hundred pounds represented the purse inexhaustible.

Dear Aunt Emily! How very, very kind! Somehow, some day Cecilia would find means to thank her and tell her how much her sudden unexpected gift had really meant: it did not then occur

to her that possibly neither the thanks nor the news would be well received since the gift had been applied to the purpose of flight. A hundred pounds ! With that sum in her possession the decision to which she had already come was made quite easy : all necessity for any return to London was obviated ; the one great obstacle to going forward as she was, namely, absence of any luggage, could now be simply overcome, and, even when re-equipped with immediate necessities, she would have some money in hand. It was all so much, much more straightforward than it might have been that Cecilia's spirits rose a little from the depths of her loneliness, and, exhilarated at once by the cold air and by action, she dressed hastily and, taking her fur coat on her arm, went downstairs.



CHAPTER VIII

THE kitchen of the farm-house, which overnight had seemed to Cecilia so warm and well-lit and welcoming, bore to her a very different air in the early hour of the November morning. A fire was already crackling in the range, but as yet it gave no heat; its sputtering light through the bars was sarcastic rather than hospitable, and no rays of sun streamed in to gild the cobwebby ceiling or relieve the sombre suggestion of the walls. Through the window nothing was to be seen except a dirty piece of yard and some straggly, untrimmed laurels: a few morose hens clucked cheerlessly outside.

Cecilia set her mind as bravely as she could against the depressing influences, flung her coat over a chair, and with a fair disguise of good spirits said 'Good morning' to the farmer's wife. The latter was clattering about rather drearily, but stopped at Cecilia's entrance and surveyed her slowly with surprise and without pleasure. The two women were each of them dressed as they had been on the previous evening, after Cecilia in the heat of the kitchen had laid aside the splendour of her sable coat—except only that now Cecilia's

hands were ringless. The one was in her smart going-away dress with a little hat that seemed to sit almost roguishly on her light-brown curls; round her neck ran a slender gold chain, at the base of which, tucked in now and hidden as much as possible, hung an emerald pendant of great beauty and value—John Harland's last gift: her shoes still bore upon them the muddy traces of her wanderings in the fields by night, but were neat and small and obviously new; her silk stockings delicately matched the dove-grey of her dress. The farmer's wife was in a short, thick, dark skirt and a blouse, no longer white, torn at the roughened neck; she wore an overall that was spotted with grease and stained with dirt; she had heavy, unlaced shoes and coarse, ungartered stockings that fell in awkward creases round her ankles. She was not more than a few years senior to Cecilia, but she appeared of an older generation. It was the contrast between a poor drudge, heavy of jowl and dour of eye, without the energy or the self-respect to keep from sinking into the slattern, and a lovely young girl who had had the leisure and means to cultivate her beauty and the taste to enhance it. Quick and simple as Cecilia's toilet had been and strained and unhappy as she was, her appearance beside the farmer's wife was that of a flower beside a vegetable. Overnight the contrast had passed unnoticed; the room had been lit only by the glow of the kitchen-range and the limited circle of a lamp, and Cecilia had

been a hungry, weary suppliant. In the cold light of morning, the one woman given to a renewal of labour, the other to freshened youth, the contrast was almost terrible, and the farmer's wife could not escape the sting of its significance.

"Thought you'd be still abed," she muttered ungraciously. "I suppose you'll be wanting summat to eat."

Cecilia replied as disarmingly as possible that she seldom ate any breakfast: all she would like was a cup of tea and some toast or bread and butter. The answer was a grunt which she took to be a mollified form of assent.

"Want some hot water too?" was the next inquiry.

When Cecilia disclaimed the desire to give further trouble and said that she had already used the cold water in her room, the woman conveyed the impression of being disillusioned as to the claims of her odd visitor to gentility. She said nothing, but with an ill grace began noisily to set the table.

Cecilia had come down anxious to be friends with every one who would give her the least encouragement; she was in great need of ordinary human sociability. She was rebuffed and chilled by her obvious unwelcomeness, but after a moment tried hard to thrust the impression from her as of no importance. She told herself that it was even rather fortunate; it would enable her to leave the more readily. She tried to be grateful for the

supper and lodging she had already received and to be indifferent to all else, rightly attributing the morning's uncivil reluctance to unavoidable envy : but she was not particularly successful. She was still too raw from the terrible wound her heart had received in the train not to feel acutely any further pressure of ungentle humanity. She sat down thinking rather bitterly to herself how little anyone need envy her, and waited for her breakfast in a silence that the farmer's wife did nothing to break.

When a meal was at last set before her, Cecilia felt it safe to seek further information and, drawing up her chair to the table, asked as casually as she could contrive for a map. A map? She was speedily made aware that such a thing was unknown in Little Pedlington : maps were for travellers and, even since the rise to wealth of Mr. Henry Ford, farmers did not fall into that category.

"The lady wants a map, George," explained the woman in cynical amusement to her husband, who, to Cecilia's discomfiture, had lounged in and taken up a stand against the wall opposite, the better to gaze stolidly upon her. "Wants to know where she be, I reckon."

"This be Little Pedlington," volunteered George as though that were the summit of all necessary knowledge. "Leastways," he conceded, after reflection, "that be the village, like. This be Lotton Farm."

Cecilia had no wish to repeat her interruption

of the previous evening : rest, food, and daylight combined had removed all impatience from her. She listened as though with interest, and then sought necessary knowledge, a slow and irritating process. Cecilia was anxious not to enlighten the farmer as to herself, he was little accustomed to enlightening any stranger about anything : the conversation zigzagged and was very easily deflected. After a length of time, however, Cecilia discovered that she was some eleven miles from Dorminster Junction and seven from the market town, Leomouth, which was the metropolis of the farmer's life.

She had already decided to avoid Dorminster Junction : it was there, if anywhere, that she would be sought for. She expressed her wish to get to Leomouth as soon as possible : seven miles was a long step and, eager as she had grown for solitude, she was reluctant to set out on foot.

"I'm goin' in there now," said George. "That's what I come in for."

How like an English yeoman, thought Cecilia with humorous exasperation : he might have saved all the talking if he had only said as much at first.

There was room for her in front, it appeared, and of her immediate difficulties only one now remained, that of payment for her night's shelter and her food. She had no money on her at all except her bundle of five-pound notes, and, though their production vastly enhanced her prestige, they

were regarded with a blend of suspicion and cupidity that was disquieting.

Muttering that she did not rightly know what to charge, that she was not used to taking strangers, had only done it to oblige, and other nebulous hints as a basis for extortion, the farmer's wife took away one of the notes and, after keeping Cecilia waiting so many minutes that it seemed improbable that there would be a reappearance, returned reluctantly with three dirty notes of one pound each, and ten shillings in silver, which it was obvious she had brought as the correct change. Cecilia was in no position to argue : it was robbery, but it might have been worse. That was a consolatory line of thought into which, as she was vaguely aware, she was already tending to fall ; it spelt indifference or at least resignation to evil : but it was true. She stretched out her hand, intending to take the change and put it in her hand-bag without a word, when the woman said acutely,

"That's not countin' George's driving you in to market, o' course."

"Course not," encouraged George, pleased with the sagacity.

"That'll be a pound," added his wife stubbornly.

"A pound !" exclaimed Cecilia with indignation.

"You don't go for less, do 'e, George?" was the cunning rejoinder. "Takin' you away from work an' all."

For an instant Cecilia hesitated : was every one

now going to prove a harpy to a girl in difficulties and alone? If so, she had better fight at once. But was it worth it? What did it matter? She was mentally too jaded to argue and physically too reluctant to walk seven miles.

"Very well," she said curtly. "As long as I go at once." She took the remaining notes and the silver before any further onslaught on her resources could develop, and, turning with a haughty gesture, picked up her coat, walked to the door and went out. Guided by the noise of the engine, which showed her conclusively that, as the farmer was making ready to go in any case, she had been weak not to stand out against the charge of a pound, she found her way to the side of an ancient Ford lorry which was quivering and clanking in the side-yard, and, clambering stubbornly in beside the driver's seat, waited with what composure she could summon for the farmer to be pleased to start.

He followed her heavily after what seemed to her a long delay and, saying by way of apology, more to himself than to her, "Have you there soon enough now, miss," got in beside her and with sundry jerks and heaves they climbed out of the yard, swung into the road and left the farm behind them. Until that morning Cecilia had always thought of farm-houses as romantic, beautiful, and flower-encircled refuges and of their inmates as broad-vowelled, simple-minded, generous-hearted folk: Lotton Farm had, she felt,

effectually disillusioned her. What did it matter? All life was disillusion: the sooner it was lived through and over, the better.

At this point of her tormented reflections she became aware first that an unbidden tear was stealing down her cheek and, secondly, that, to the great peril of their bumping progress along the road, the farmer was staring at it instead of keeping his attention to his driving. Angrily she brushed away the signal of her emotion and by returning his stare with sharpness diverted him from immediate speech.

They drove on uncomfortably, Cecilia feeling supremely ridiculous, dressed in sables, sitting beside a red-faced, corduroyed man on the front of a battered old farm-lorry, driving along to a wretched little town of whose previous existence she had never heard.

"Where d'you want to be set down?" at last inquired the farmer, as a few houses appeared and it was evident they were close to Leomouth.

"Anywhere," she replied shortly: then, noticing the puzzled look that began to spread slowly over his features, she added, "Anywhere in the centre of the town, I mean."

He laughed ruminatively as at a joke to be chewed. "I thought for a minute you didn't mind where you went," he said after he had finished; "and that'd be a fine thing, wouldn't it?"

"Very," she answered curtly, desirous of getting to the end of this fantastic drive.

"Your friends'll be wondering about you, shouldn't wonder," he went on; "asking all about the place, may be?" He shot her a glance of renewed curiosity.

"Perhaps. I'll be all right. Don't you worry about me: I know my way about," she replied, trying to throw into her tones at once politeness and decision.

"Oh: bin 'ere before. I thought as you were a stranger."

Cecilia did not enlighten him and, to her great relief, conversation dropped. They were now running into the town and the farmer was compelled to give his attention to his steering.


On reaching what appeared to be the main street Cecilia stopped him and, before he could question her further, jumped off the lorry, flung him a cold 'Thank you' and walked away purposefully as though to a known destination before anything further to say occurred to him. As she went, she wondered at her flare of irritation: she was not as a rule so discouraging, but since the episode of the payment she had taken an intense dislike to both host and hostess. She had looked for kindness, never had she needed it more, and she had been fleeced. She had been received, fed, and sheltered, but not out of generosity of heart, solely out of greed. The farm might have been the gentle starting-point of new life; instead, it was humiliatingly allied to her most terrible hour of disillusion. It had given

her no fresh courage ; it had merely added to her shame.

She could not, however, walk for an indefinite distance down a crowded street : she must quickly make up her mind what it was best for her now to do, and do it. When she first stopped and turned her head, she was embarrassed to see that the farmer had met a crony and was still concerning himself about her and encouraging another to do likewise : he was pointing her out and speaking with a volubility that he had denied himself to her. She decided to take no notice, but to walk on and lose herself to him as speedily as she could. Presently a side-turning offered itself : she took immediate advantage of it and felt relieved at finding herself once more dependent solely on her own exertions. She was still, however, far from being at ease : she was dreadfully conspicuous, she felt, in her richness of coat and newness of attire ; she was proceeding up a small street in an unknown, inconsiderable market-town with no other object than to free herself from the only person of whom she had the least knowledge. The whole situation was absurd and would have been laughable but for the melancholy truth that it was based upon her life's ruin. It was idle to say so to herself : she must begin without delay to rebuild the foundations of her existence : the tragedy would remain, but the absurdity could, and should, be overcome.

What she had to do, she decided, was to equip herself with some clothes, after that to procure a

lodging as cheaply as was consistent with respectability, and then to see what she could do in the way of finding herself work. With these three objects in view—the first immediate, the second not necessarily where she now was, and the third at a reasonable distance of time, thanks to Aunt Emily, and most decidedly not in a noisy, unattractive little market-town—Cecilia walked the length of the side-street, found herself getting further and further from shops and into a region of small drab cottages, and took the first turning that she judged would lead her back to the main street. The spurt of energy that had carried her in irritation from the farmer soon died away: women stared at her, children gaped at her, once a man looked after her desirously and would have spoken but for the damping detachment with which her eyes had rested on him and the air of reserved dignity with which she passed. After half an hour's walking, she found herself, tired and growing hot, in a region of shops amongst which those of butchers and provision-merchants seemed to predominate unduly, and could begin more precisely her search, first for a second-hand suit-case or trunk and then for something to put into it.



CHAPTER IX

THERE are some periods of our lives which, however important in their bearing upon our future, can never in that future be vividly recalled. In periods of illness, for example, though the battle for existence may be of the essence of great drama, nevertheless even at the time and certainly afterwards every day seems like a heavy waggon drawn across the windows, the same as yesterday, differentiated only in degree of pain or discomfort. The vital spark burns low, and it is not until health is once more on the threshold that the sufferer begins to notice again the real differences between day and day. Only in such periods, out of the dark and dreary plain, emerge a few isolated moments which arrested the consciousness at the instant of their occurrence and stab the memory afterwards till it is these that seem to the looker-back to have been the whole experience of those periods.

Cecilia was not ill, but her sensations were blunted as though by illness. There was to her nothing memorable, nothing even of the least interest in all that happened to her for several days after she had shaken off the farmer from Lotton

and had started to re-equip herself—nothing but one moment, and that connected, not with that present into which she was seeking desperately to fling her mind but with that past with which, she knew, she had no further concern. It was the evening of the second day after her arrival at Leomouth: she was sitting in the lounge of a small hotel, listless and indifferent to everything about her. In a few minutes it would be dinner-time: she would eat something, whatever was put in front of her, after that she would kill time somehow with a book for an hour or so and then would go to bed; she would not sleep, but she could try to rest her limbs at any rate, even if her brain would refuse to be subdued.

The lounge had been empty when she descended into it: now it was filling up, at least several people were drifting in and to Cecilia in her nervous isolation several people made a crowd. She dreaded above all things that they would speak to her: the desire she had felt at Lotton Farm for kindly human intercourse had left her; the humiliation of that seemed to be far more acute than was in any degree reasonable, and she was buttoning herself up in the disgust of disillusion against all the world. And it was not merely strange women who were frighteningly curious: there were a couple of elderly ladies in the hotel whose eyes followed her movements and whose lips expressed their silent disapproval; she was young, she was lovely, she was well-dressed, she was intriguing in

her pallor with the dark patches under her eyes, she wore no wedding-ring, and she was alone—they had every possible cause for feminine condemnation. But also, and worse, there were men. Men stared at her and without disapproval: they smirked and ogled her; no one had yet actually done or said anything to give offence, but they caused her, even in their silence, to feel insufficiently dressed—and the fear that they would speak was always present. Cecilia was neither an old-fashioned, ignorant miss, nor was she a coward: since her father's death three years ago she had earned her own living and gone about alone carelessly and cheerfully. But that was in places familiar to her and with a heart unimpaired. Now all was changed: she was a stranger in a hostile world, and she was so weary; the very thought of the necessity for repelling intrusion or dealing with suggestion appalled her. She could, and would, hold her own, but, oh, the effort of even keeping on alive! If to that a struggle was to be superimposed, she did not know how she could endure it. And from all that was in any way suggestive of physical desire her whole being now shrank. Man! She never wanted to see or speak to another again.

A youth entered the lounge and, avoiding the two elderly ladies, began drifting in Cecilia's direction. He was quite presentable and in earlier ages, before her sun went out, Cecilia would have enjoyed an interchange of talk and ideas with him:

now, seeing his purpose, she felt like a wild animal on which the hereditary enemy, a human being, is bearing down. Searching hastily for refuge, she leaned forward and seized upon the disordered pages of a daily paper that some one had read and flung down on the little table in front of her: mechanically she began to read. She had not intended her device to be obvious, and was almost ashamed of herself when round the edge of the paper she saw the youth check abruptly: with heightened colour she bent her head down and fixed her eyes on the pages that lay open. Out of the confused welter of print a name started out and struck her consciousness so vividly that she almost cried aloud, the name with which she was most concerned and with which she now had nothing to do. "Sir John Harland and his charming bride," she read, "are spending the first part of their honeymoon at the delightfully old-world town of Matringfield: their stay is, however, not expected to be a long one, as they are going shortly to America and intend to be away for some months."

Cecilia started to her feet and threw down the paper: why was it allowed to publish such inaccuracies? They were to have been at Matringfield, but every one must now know that they were not there, both of them at any rate, now. America! There had never been the least suggestion of that. 'Old-world'—that silly, over-used epithet was enough to stamp the journal in which it appeared.

In the suddenness of her emotion at being brought face to face so unexpectedly with her own might-have-been, she became oblivious of the glances that a few moments before had been oppressive : she walked abruptly across the lounge to the side-table on which lay several newspapers and, picking up *The Times*, turned with hasty, unsteady fingers to the Court page. Her eye ran swiftly down the list of social announcements and then she bit her lip upon an exclamation of surprise. She read : "Sir John and Lady Harland have returned to London and are leaving at once for a prolonged holiday on the Continent. No letters will be forwarded."

What did that mean ? She had sufficient faith in *The Times* to feel that it was improbable that its editor would allow a definite statement of that character to be inserted without some authority : it read like an announcement sent for insertion by the parties concerned. In the last forty-eight hours, try as she would, she had been unable to keep her thoughts from dwelling continually upon John Harland. Had her note been delivered to him ? If it had been, how had he taken it ? If it had not been, how ? And, after that, what had he done ? Broken his journey abruptly or gone on ? And then what ? These and hundreds of similar questions had invaded her and given her no respite. Here at any rate was information, if it could be relied on. But the other paper had said just as definitely that John Harland and she

were at Matringfield : part of that must be wrong ; she was in the lounge of a second-rate hotel, a hundred miles from Matringfield, to prove it. Was the other part right or wrong too ? Was John there in the quiet old town where they had decided to spend—yes, it was quite correct—‘ the first part of their honeymoon,’ because there they could be undisturbed and at peace together—an impossibility if they had gone to either of his country houses—or had he returned to town ? And was he now going abroad ? What did it matter ? Nothing mattered any more ; certainly John Harland, her husband, could not matter to her, Cecilia Brooke, any, any more.

She dropped *The Times* wearily and picked up *The Western Morning News*. There it was again, again definite and again different : “ Sir John and Lady Harland, who had arranged to spend their honeymoon in the West of England, have been obliged to alter their plans owing to the sudden illness of a near relative, and left for Spain yesterday.”

It was puzzling ; the first paragraph said they were going to America soon, the second that they were going to the Continent at once, and the third that they had already gone to Spain. A common idea seemed to underly the statements, varying as they were, and all agreed that John and she were together. It had therefore not yet become a matter for notoriety that their marriage on which so much social gossip had been expended had

already come to an end in smoke. There was nothing left in the world in which Cecilia could any more take pleasure, but she was glad that John Harland was thus far at least screened from the ridicule that would attach to a man married and deserted in the same afternoon. Never in a single one of her thoughts had there been the slightest wish for, or intention of, revenge. He had been her king; and, even dethroned, she would wish him to be without blemish in the eyes of men. Yes, she had a positive feeling of gladness that the papers had garbled the accounts of their movements: in a short time no one would be interested in her; her news value would have evaporated and, as far as the general public were concerned, when Sir John Harland reappeared without her, the wife of a day could quietly be forgotten.


The dinner-gong sounded as she stood, gazing still with puzzled eyes at the third paragraph. With a start she returned to the dismalness of reality and with a spot of colour in each pale cheek and a renewed sense of devastation in her heart moved dejectedly in to a meal, every mouthful of which was repellent to her. The present was more hateful even than before by reason of that unlooked-for intrusion of the past.

It was this memory, this episode of the three paragraphs that alone had power to live on: it was sufficiently poignant to pierce through the armour of indifference that Cecilia strove so hard to cast round herself in the days following on her

flight. It stood out later as the one thing that had really happened in a wilderness of days. For the rest, she had blurred visions of her difficult and uncertain course. She had shopped not according to her plan but as she found it easiest at the time, purchasing only bare necessities out of an inborn prudence that whispered to her that, care for life as little as she might, still life went on, and for life money was necessary: she knew, though she gave no mind to it consciously, that her little stock of five-pound notes stood between her and a cruelty of the world even greater than that which she had suffered in her love, and she dribbled them out accordingly. But they were uncomfortable possessions: her two notes of a pound each and her ten shillings in silver were gone, almost before she realized it, in the initial stages of re-equipping herself with necessities, and then she had to have recourse to the second of Aunt Emily's wad. It was viewed with suspicion in the unpretentious shop: it caused not merely doubt, but delay. And in the succeeding days this was a recurring experience: one by one the five-pound notes were produced with hesitation, scanned with curiosity and changed with difficulty—however simply she lived.

She had left Leomouth the same afternoon as she had entered it: it had nothing that made it of interest or use to her beyond the first essential purchases. She had moved on without purpose, in a state of unhappy restlessness that would not

let her be until she was too tired physically to want to move further : she avoided towns instinctively at first, and then came to rest in a small one, not five miles from the sea, where she resolved first to finish the purchasing of her simple wardrobe and then to find work which would not only give her something other than her own desolation on which to feed but would enable her to put by the rest of her capital. She had still, in her little hand-bag, thirteen of her twenty notes when she came to this resolution : she was in no straits of poverty, but loneliness and uselessness were devouring her like acids. She was able to tell herself boldly that she certainly need not take uncongenial work, she could afford to pick and choose, but work of some kind she must have speedily if she were not to lose all spirit. And so by stages she was led towards the house of Humphrey Lasker, doctor of medicine, Rosalie his wife, and Mostyn their distinctly precious son.



CHAPTER X

CECILIA had the curious feeling that her life was nothing but a set of unenviable circles when, all the simple purchases suitable to her lowly estate made, she set out to seek for work. She had left the hotel in the lounge of which she had been stabbed by three successive paragraphs : small as it was, it was not only much too expensive for her resources ; it was also much too public for her mind. She had met with moderate success in looking for lodgings that should be at once respectable and cheap, and was proportionately cheered. But, as she set out from them on her quest for work, she was irresistibly reminded of setting out on a similar errand three years before. Then, her father's funeral over, his possessions sold by auction, she had gone out of newly acquired lodgings, with a small stock of money in hand and a grief-laden heart, to find work : she was in the same state now.

Yet there were differences, too marked not to be instantly felt. Then she was just twenty, poor but used to being poor, neatly but cheaply dressed, grieving for the loss of a loved father through the natural cause of death : now she was twenty-

three and far more than three years older in experience, suddenly poor after being lifted momentarily to great wealth, dressed simply but very well, with a husband to whom she had given all her heart lost to her for ever through the unnatural cause of the most bitter disillusion. The cheerfulness with which she had tried to face the street was terribly assailed even as she descended the steps of her lodgings.

She repelled the assault stoutly and declined to be in any way deterred from her immediate purpose; but she was speedily made aware that she had not taken account of all the differences between her two states. Three years before, she had had no particular qualifications for any post, but she was in a parish where she was known and where her father had been widely beloved: there were many to recommend her and more to advise; she had found congenial work in a well-established private school without prolonged difficulty. Now she was unknown and could hardly procure evidence even of her limited experience without revealing to her former head-mistress the miserable cause for the surprisingly renewed necessity—and that she was determined, come what might, never to do.

She repaired therefore to the agency that her landlady had recommended rather in the position of one who would capture a strong position single-handed: it needed a devil-may-care, buccaneering spirit to make the adventure probable and this

Cecilia no longer possessed. Once, in the times of long ago, she could have gone at it with a laugh; now the most she could achieve was to approach it steadfastly in the feeling of self-immolation.

On her entrance into the agency she was greeted with a cordiality that touched her: she asked to see the principal, and the girl who took her name was most civil and even apologetic at the idea that she might have to wait a few minutes; the principal rose to meet her with a welcoming smile. Cecilia's whole being expanded at the unexpected friendliness.

"Sit down, Miss Brooke, please," said the principal, Miss Chivers, placing a chair for her. "What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

Miss Chivers, elderly, small, tight-lipped and close-cropped, bent towards her young visitor and smiled her deferentially into a seat by her desk: she then seated herself and, taking up a pen, poised it with a suggestion of dramatic efficiency over a blank half-sheet of note-paper. A sudden, fearful doubt swept over Cecilia: this was not friendliness, it was business—and based upon an error of eyesight. Her expanded being contracted sharply, she flushed slightly with embarrassment and found it difficult to answer steadily.

"I want work," she said, considering frankness the only remedy. "I'm sorry if——"

"Work?" If it were possible for vocal chords, using only one syllable, to run down a whole piano, beginning with the high note of disappointment

and ending in the bass of contempt, Miss Chivers achieved that feat. She followed it up by another, almost equally remarkable, a single glance expressive at once of her chagrin that anyone should have so deceived her, of her astonishment that a girl of Cecilia's appearance and attire should be seeking and not creating work, and finally of her belief that one with the attributes before her was incapable of doing any work worth mentioning.

Cecilia felt, like a right and left, the double pain of this syllable, this glance; but, contracted and dispirited as it made her, it did not deflect her from her purpose. Internally, she might nurse the wounds heaped upon her by the world: outwardly, she was hardened into a courageous dignity.

"Yes, work," she repeated. "I've been recommended to your agency as the best in the town, and I'm sorry if there's been a mistake."

'A lady,' decided Miss Chivers, running her practised eye again over her visitor: 'expensively dressed, newly dressed too, a stranger obviously, wants work, h'mph.' Aloud she said with a slight relenting, "It is the best in the town, in the county for that matter."

"I've had teaching experience—in London," Cecilia began.

"References, of course," said Miss Chivers casually, as she reached for her card-index with a sigh.

"Er—yes, I could have, but I—I don't care to write for them—for purely personal reasons."

Miss Chivers stopped her movement : her hand lay outstretched on the edge of the index-box, motionless. She lifted her eyes only and plunged them icily into Cecilia's confusion.

"Really?" she said at last, and once again she employed her remarkable powers of saying whole sentences in a single word. "That's—er—rather—er—unsatisfactory—to all parties." She dribbled out the syllables like so many drops of cold water.

"I know, I know," answered Cecilia hastily : "and of course it means I could only ask a small salary, at first at any rate."

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of my reputation," replied Miss Chivers chillily.

"That will be perfectly safe, Miss Chivers," replied Cecilia, speaking with considerable animation : she had the vision to see the interview from the point of view of her interlocutrix and realized that she should be grateful not to have been immediately shown the door. "I'm perfectly respectable, and perfectly competent. I've taught in a good school for three years—but I've—I've quarrelled with my—my people ; and I'm not going to write home, even if I starve !"

"It's unusual," murmured Miss Chivers, attracted in spite of her training.

"I know. And if you won't help, I must apply elsewhere, that's all." Cecilia rose, unwilling to argue, unable to plead.

"I will take all particulars that you care to give me," answered Miss Chivers with some hesitation,

“and enter you on my books. I can’t promise you anything though, you understand.”

Cecilia thanked her impulsively and looked so young and so essentially well-bred that Miss Chivers asked her to sit down again with more sympathy than her business instincts approved. She entered the scanty particulars Cecilia gave, and then said, “Well, I’ll offer you to one or two clients I’ve in mind, but I don’t hold out hopes of a school. Governessing—somewhere where they’re not too particular—that’s about all you can look for, you know. I’m sorry, but there it is. Look in, if you like, from time to time, if you don’t hear from me.”

It was not said unkindly, but it was terribly depressing. Truth was, thought Cecilia, as she again thanked Miss Chivers and took her departure. She walked away, trying to tell herself that it was certainly no worse than she had anticipated, and even in some ways was better, whilst Miss Chivers rehabilitated her own professional self-esteem at the expense of her kindest feelings by rating her clerk soundly for having given her such an incorrect description of the ‘young person’ who had merely called to place herself on the books of the agency.

As a consequence when Cecilia came again on the following morning—not hopefully but because she had nothing else in the whole world to do—she was treated by the girl with a disdain that in other circumstances would have amused her, but

in the actual fact seemed as unnecessary as unkind. She was told brusquely that it was no manner of use her calling again yet; she would receive a notification if anything suitable turned up, and, no, she could not see Miss Chivers: Miss Chivers was particularly engaged with an important client.

Cecilia had many such rebuffs and more days of weary, unprofitable waiting. Once her hopes were raised by a card asking her to call at a certain hour, but they were dashed almost before the interview had begun: a gray-haired, steely-eyed woman, unusually tall and straight, who was with Miss Chivers when she was shown in, whispered at once in an audible tone to the little principal, with a significant shake of the head, "Too pretty: never do at all; sorry you troubled her." After that the questions were perfunctory, and Cecilia knew well that the politely-spoken dismissal, "I'll let Miss Chivers know when I've thought it over," was final. For an instant she meditated an impassioned appeal; but solitude and unhappiness had slowed her impulses, whilst at the same time robbing her of self-confidence. She accepted her doom numbly and again found herself in the street, still unemployed.

During the succeeding week she tried everywhere, submitting herself for any employment that offered. Twice she was listened to, but curiously and without avail, more often she was laughed at, a stranger without references or special attainments, and once she was grossly insulted. In the

end, face to face with the utter dreariness of idle, unwanted days and with the steady shrinkage of her little store of notes that alone stood between her and complete helplessness, she pocketed all pride and wrote a pitiful little prayer to Miss Chivers, imploring her to find her something, however humble. A whole twenty-four hours elapsed friendlessly, silently : at their close Cecilia resolved that, unless her fate changed by the end of the week, she must go back to London whilst she still had money for the fare, confess her love's degradation and her life's ruin to her old associates and with a persistence past shame beg for work from them. She was spared that last and greatest evil : in the morning she found by her plate a letter from Miss Chivers, asking her to call again, Miss Chivers hoped to be able to place her.

Compared with Miss Chivers's hope, Cecilia's was a radiancy. Miss Chivers was not anxious to send any girl to take up an unsatisfactory post—it reflected upon her agency to have one back again with a complaint in a few weeks—and she had been oddly touched by Cecilia : but she consoled herself by the reflection that after all she had done her best. No good client would take a girl with no references of any kind : it was this unusual Miss Brooke's own obstinate reticence that was to blame.

She did what she felt possible without direct disloyalty to her employer-client by explaining to Cecilia that the place which was once more vacant was considered difficult : she had recommended

girls to it on several occasions, none had stayed long ; did Miss Brooke really wish for it ? It was quite respectable, but very poorly paid, a post of ' governess to a small boy,' a doctor's son, aged seven. Miss Brooke did wish for it, more deeply than she had in the past wished for far more desirable things. Miss Chivers accepted the assurance and mentally did her utmost to wash herself free of all further responsibility.

" But don't they want to see me ? " asked Cecilia, in doubt, unable to believe that her time of most miserable waiting was ended. " To ask questions and settle things, I mean ? "

Miss Chivers intimated that " they " were ready to rely upon her recommendation.

" So I—I'm engaged ? " faltered Cecilia.

" It's a very small salary," confessed Miss Chivers. " It's against my principles to offer it, but they won't give more."

" I don't care," replied Cecilia valiantly. " They'll house and feed me, I suppose ? "

Yes, that was included of course. Cecilia with a grateful, excited heart took down all the necessary information. She was to present herself that evening at a quarter to seven precisely at the house of Dr. Humphrey Lasker, 42 Laburnum Villas : Miss Chivers would telephone her acceptance. Cecilia walked out of the staid, little room, feeling as though at last her luck had turned : life could never again be rosy, but it need not continue always to be grim. She would make friends, she

would win herself a position, she had work, she was wanted : her step was lighter than it had been at any moment since her flight.

Miss Chivers looked after her a moment with some commiseration, then with an impatient gesture sought to disperse what she felt to be a wave of unbusinesslike sentimentality and settled down to receive with patience a constant client and try to persuade her that paragons with the qualifications and of the cheapness desired simply did not any longer exist. But, even after a long day's work, she could not wholly dismiss Cecilia from her mind.

CHAPTER XI

CECILIA had acquired an old trunk as well as the suit-case which had been one of her first fresh possessions : the trunk she had felt to be necessary to enable her to keep safely, and unostentatiously, the sable coat that she had as yet found no means of despatching back to the giver without at once revealing a direct clue to her whereabouts. She had bought herself in its place a warm, but quite simple and inexpensive, coat : the incongruity of this over her smart going-away dress had not bothered her, it was no use hoarding the latter or buying more than she was compelled. As a consequence of her possessions, scanty as these in reality were, she was obliged to drive to her new appointment : had she had a suit-case only, she would have saved her shillings.

In her aimless wanderings, whilst waiting and looking about for opportunities that never came, she had explored the town with some particularity ; she remembered she had passed at least once down Laburnum Villas and thought that she could have found her way again there on foot. It was, however, of course impossible for her to carry trunk and suit-case, and it seemed hardly worth investi-

gating the possibilities of a carrier. She gave these a moment's consideration, so vivid had become to her the path of strictest economy, but dismissed them. She could not guess that by so doing she prejudiced her popularity at the outset—not that it could have been long maintained, whatever her mode of arrival.

It was not easy to get a cab at her humble lodgings: they were not on the telephone nor situated on a street or even in a quarter where cabs were in demand: she had to go out and search for one. When at length found it was ancient, and, when started, it proved to be incapable of hurry. It was not at 'a quarter to seven precisely' but fourteen minutes later that the vehicle drew up at the gate leading through a small, oblong, and extremely bare garden to the front-door of No. 42 Laburnum Villas.

"I'm a bit late and I meant to be so punctual," thought Cecilia, as she descended, "but they can't be particular or they'd never have engaged me in so casual a way: anyhow, it can't be helped."

She was not aware as she turned to assist the driver to get her trunk down that she was being subjected to the closest scrutiny possible from the crack of the just-opened surgery window. Dr. Humphrey Lasker was observing his son's new governess with a sensation as close to disinterested pain as his egotistical avarice made possible: it was nothing to him, of course, that this fool of a young girl should be flinging her money about,

arriving in a loaded cab for all the world as if she were gentry, but it was a disheartening exhibition—and a very bad example. His wife would be asking for a cab next: that would be deplorable. It crossed his mind that no real harm was to be apprehended: his wife might ask, if she were still so lacking in experience of him as to have the least ground for hope, but he would have the pleasure of refusing. It was not apprehension for the success of any inroad on his own purse that vexed him: it was the principle of the wanton extravagance. And the governess was late, fourteen minutes and ten seconds late by his watch—a pretty display of independence to begin with. Dr. Lasker shut down his surgery-window with the noiselessness of long practice and, going quickly round to his front-door, threw it open with dramatic suddenness and confronted the new addition to his household as she came springily up the few yards of garden path.

Humphrey Lasker had at no time in his life been good-looking: even in youth he had been of a disconcerting angularity; but in his twenties the brilliance of his eyes had suggested intellect and his long, thin face asceticism. There had been about him something interesting, something at any rate unusual in the way in which, despite many disadvantages both of birth and fortune, he had fought his way to his doctor's degree: at one time a future of distinction had been prophesied for him, but the very qualities that had given him a

good start proved in their growth fatal to his advancement. He had never sown in order to reap: such a policy was altogether alien to his nature. He had taken a small practice because it had come his way as a bargain just when a little legacy from an uncle made its acquisition possible, and he had slaved to extend it, willing to spend his own nerves and muscles, but nothing material that could by any means be avoided. In the next twenty years he had committed one extravagance: he had married certainly, an act which provided him with a housekeeper at the cheapest possible rate—he had no cause for remorse in that respect—but he had not stopped there, he had begotten a son—and that, in its financial aspect, was a perpetual torment to him. A son was an asset, at least might be so regarded, an insurance against old age perhaps; but, whatever the merits, a son was undeniably and unavoidably an expense. Dr. Lasker had, however, one real ground for solid satisfaction; he could contemplate in his son, Mostyn Theodosius Emmanuel Lasker—names cost nothing, even in a baptismal service—a precise and painstaking replica of himself.

Now at the matured age of forty-seven, his hair carefully streaked across the bald dome of his head, his thin nostrils distended and his bright little eyes, flashing behind glasses, searching out all the details of Cecilia's attire, he faced his new employée with a fine bluster of authority.

Mentally he commented, 'Pretty, very pretty,

Miss Chivers should have told me that ; extravagant, that hat cost a pretty penny, and those shoes ; silk stockings, h'm ; cheap coat, bought recently at Dafferton's, I should think : and, dear me, what a smarty underneath ! Got into trouble obviously or she wouldn't be here without references, wish I'd cut the salary still more ; not too late perhaps. Wants watching and firm handling, but on the face of it a real bargain. Can't help herself—bound to stop.'

Aloud he said sharply, " Are you from Miss Chivers ? "

Cecilia, still unprepared for hostility, in spite of the continually downward trend of the wheel of her fate, checked instantly at his tone : she looked up at him with her clear hazel eyes, and it seemed to her that never had she seen anyone so utterly devoid of all amiability. Her heart sank and she made admission of her origin tremblingly.

" I said ' a quarter to seven, ' " went on Dr. Lasker, disliking her gaze but pleased with the effect that his tone had produced : " didn't she tell you ? "

Cecilia apologized and explained. He heard her in a silence he sought to make dignified, and then said coldly, " The engagement was for a quarter to seven : if you'd wished to make a good impression you wouldn't have been late. In new work the start is everything. I don't know that in the circumstances I care to——"

He paused dramatically and before Cecilia the

abyss of unemployment once more yawned: he noted with keen internal satisfaction the sudden flicker of her anxiety and continued with unction, "Miss Chivers seems to have failed to impress upon you the importance of punctuality: I hope you understand the terms on which you are engaged?"

Cecilia murmured that she thought so, but Dr. Lasker continued hastily to forestall inconvenient interruption. "Your duties here will be light and very pleasant: we treat our staff as one of ourselves, quite as one of ourselves. You appreciate that attendance on my little son will hardly take up all your time: I shall expect you to help me generally and give my wife a hand in the house, of course?"

Miss Chivers had made no mention of any such expectation, but Cecilia was eager to be agreeable and to be treated as a friend, whatever her new employer's understanding of friendship was.

"Very good." Dr. Lasker was delighted with himself: he had not only practised a delicate piece of cruelty on the girl, but had established a claim on her as a general drudge. Excellent, so excellent that, coupled with his shrewd summary of her circumstances, it encouraged him to further ingenuity. Casually he mentioned as her salary a sum only two-thirds even of the pittance named by Miss Chivers. It was so bare-faced a piece of double-dealing that Cecilia's quick spirit rose in revolt: without calculating the consequences, she corrected him abruptly.

For a full moment they faced one another, both desperately afraid that they had allowed themselves to be carried away beyond redemption, Dr. Lasker by his love of cheeseparing, Cecilia by her abhorrence of trickery. It was a terrible moment : Dr. Lasker tortured himself with the thought that he had lost a wonderful bargain, Cecilia was aghast with fear that she had lost that which, however poor, was yet very precious to her. She could not yield, nevertheless : to do so would be, she realized, to place herself bound hand and foot in the power of a vampire. A memory of the extortioners of Lotton Farm flashed across her mind : she had yielded to them when to have fought would have been far easier : now, when she had so much to lose, she could not bring herself to pretend. She had at least regained something that in the first shock of her disillusionment had gone from her. An attempt was being made to rob her just because her need was so great : it could not be allowed to succeed. She had time to wonder at herself whilst Dr. Lasker wrestled with his conflicting passions ; but, in spite of her wonder, she held on and threw her whole fortune into the scale by saying with all the firmness she could,

“ In that case, Dr. Lasker, you must find some one else.”

It was the bitterness of defeat to him, but to her the bitterness of death. She was turning away blindly to the gate when he spoke and gave her back existence. “ Well, well, we won’t quarrel

over a few pounds. I'm sure you'll suit very well. Come in, Miss Brooke, and I'll tell my wife you're here."

Dr. Lasker was a man who had made a fine art of enmity. With intellectual gifts above the average, far-flung ambitions, and a bitter consciousness of the humble sphere of his life's activities, he had come to attribute his limited opportunities to every cause but his own character. Inherently tortuous, he was unable to be honest even with himself. He was easily offended and, when offended, implacable. Cecilia had humiliated him in his own eyes: she had caused him to overstep prudence and forced him to recede: that no one could ever hope to do to Dr. Lasker with impunity. But as he was practised at self-deception, so he was adept at concealing, when he wished, his line of thought.

He flashed at Cecilia's unseeing form a glance of acidulated malice even as he put a jocular lightness into his voice. He was worsted, but only in the first round: there would be many others, in these he would be both referee and stake-holder. Only one comment he permitted himself by way of immediate retaliation. Glancing at her trunk and suit-case he said with a joviality in which there was no warmth, "Quite a lot of luggage; I hope that means that you won't be in a hurry to leave us."

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CHAPTER XII

CECILIA had been unprepared for Dr. Lasker, but he had done much in a few minutes to prepare her for his family. She found, as she had swiftly anticipated, that Mrs. Lasker was a pallid and futile woman who had long ago given up the pain of producing her wishes uselessly against the authoritative egoism of her husband, and that the son of this one-stringed marriage was without any of the attractions of youth.

So much was forced upon her knowledge immediately. She did her utmost to repel the new impressions that came crowding in upon her so unpleasantly: she told herself that she was naturally seeing everything with a prejudiced eye, that settling in among strangers in such a humble capacity could in no event be an agreeable process and that, now that she had demonstrated from the start that there was a limit to her endurance of unfairness, she would be able reasonably to hold her own. But no amount of self-encouragement did more than enable her to bear her state with resolution: she was grateful to the fates that she had at last found a job, but beyond this no philosophy could impel her. It was a wretched job among

thoroughly mean and unamiable people in a cheerless, ugly little house—to be endured but by no possibility enjoyed. Long before she was able to go to bed she had decided to keep it for a while, gain experience and acquaintance in the locality, and then exchange it for a better post at the earliest opportunity.

During her first evening, for the only time, as it turned out, of all the evenings she spent at 42 Laburnum Villas, all four inmates were in agreement concerning her. She wished to be left alone, to readjust herself and to engage yet again in that most useless of all occupations, retrospect. Dr. Lasker wished her to get her things unpacked and herself established so that removal should be the more difficult; Mrs. Lasker, with the feeble, jealous spite of the anæmic, resented her dress, her looks, and her speech—in that order—and was eager to banish her from the general gaze; Mostyn with precocious cold-heartedness was most anxious not to commit himself until he had studied all the weaknesses of his new satellite. It did not occur to him that a governess could be anything but a servant to his whims. An unhealthy, pimply boy of seven, Mostyn alternately rejoiced and exasperated his father by the exhibition of traits of astute calculation, selfishness, and cruelty more pronounced even than his own. Mostyn's mother spoilt and dreaded him, and no governess yet had discovered how, in the absence of parental backing, it was possible to deal with him at all.

Mostyn confided to his mother, upon whose attendance this first evening he insisted, that he was sure he was not going to like his new governess: before Cecilia's authority had even been exercised, it had been undermined by Mrs. Lasker's endeavour to curry favour with her son by little surmises of agreement.

"You will find Mostyn very intelligent," said Dr. Lasker to Cecilia whilst mother and son were upstairs. "I expect him to get a scholarship: I look to you to make sure of that."

Cecilia put a few questions to ascertain the extent of Mostyn's attainments, but Dr. Lasker disliked being questioned, especially on a subject about which he knew little, and cut her short with, "You will of course make it your business to find that out for yourself to-morrow."

A little later, Mrs. Lasker on her return, began, "Mostyn is a delicate and sensitive child, Miss Brooke, and takes dislikes to people very quickly. He can be led, but not forced, you understand."

She said much more in the same strain until abruptly silenced by Dr. Lasker's reiteration of his insistence upon a scholarship. "High time he was made to work, eating his head off here."

That last achievement was, Cecilia decided even before her first meal was cleared away, an utter impossibility in that house. She had never been a great eater, and of late had lost most of what little appetite was normally hers, but even so she found her supper inadequate. A cold joint was on

the table and Dr. Lasker carved it with the delicate touch of a painter on ivory: when his own turn came, he had to endure a struggle between miserliness and greed, and for every advantage that the latter gained, the former recovered ground later at Mrs. Lasker's or Cecilia's expense. The whole meal was a battle of desperate weighings and calculations and every article of food was personally dribbled out by Dr. Lasker. Cecilia received one sharp reminder both of her subordination and of the ways of the house. Dr. Lasker had earlier given her a fraction of a spoonful of marmalade and in due course and without its entering her head that her act would be questioned or remarked, she put forth her hand to help herself to some more. Before her fingers reached the pot, Dr. Lasker with a look as incensed as his action was agile had snatched it up and, rising, had thrust it into the cupboard behind him, which he promptly locked. Then he reseated himself, saying tensely to the astounded Cecilia, "I thought as much. You have been very extravagantly brought up. You will learn economy here or go."

It was obvious that he was so outraged in his most cherished feelings that he was willing to dismiss her, bargain as she was, on the spot, rather than capitulate. In fact, his degree of niggardliness attained to such a dignity and he acted and spoke with such decision that Cecilia was too entirely taken aback to protest and found herself forced almost into apology. In bed, later, the memory of

his fiery defiance recurred to her, as she lay nibbling a piece of chocolate that she had bought to celebrate her engagement, and it seemed so absurdly trivial that she laughed a little into the darkness. It had been her presumption as much as her 'extravagance' no doubt that had so moved him: she must remember that she was a dependent and really she ought to be flattered that in the simplicity of the bare, little, servantless house she was allowed to have meals with her employers. People who behaved so must be very easy to manage; they must have so many foibles. She would get round them soon enough. With something of the same kind of thought as had visited Mostyn about herself, she presently fell asleep.

Mostyn gave no trouble for the first hour of the succeeding day: superciliously as to an inferior but without intractability, he showed Cecilia where his belongings were, allowed her to finish his dressing, and preceded her docilely down to breakfast. His behaviour was a pleasant surprise and, coupled with a sunny morning following on a night's rest, caused Cecilia to think that perhaps she had been wrong in drawing hastily such bleak conclusions overnight as to the entire household. Moreover, she continued upon this auspicious beginning by a good start at breakfast: she rose a whole point in Dr. Lasker's estimation, an achievement which would not have been to her advantage had she retained the elevation, since the greater her value in Dr. Lasker's eyes the more

she would be exploited—but she did not retain it. She began by politely declining the minute fragment of fish he reluctantly pushed across at her: she hardly ever ate any breakfast, she explained.

Dr. Lasker's bright little eyes beamed as with swift dexterity he removed the fragment from the plate and conveyed it lovingly back to the covered dish; this effected safely, he looked at her almost with amiability and said, "You're very wise; most people spoil their figures by over-indulgence. It is a habit that cannot be sufficiently reprobated."

"It's a long time to lunch," muttered Mostyn sulkily, his brief hope of profiting by Cecilia's abstention dissipated.

"I used to take a glass of milk and a biscuit about 11 if I got hungry," explained Cecilia, not sufficiently interested in the theme to pause to consider the effect of such a confession.

For a moment Dr. Lasker sat rigid, genuinely aghast at an attitude so inimical to all his most cherished predilections, glaring at her as though she were a wolf in sheep's clothing, a most dangerous inmate for any respectable establishment: then he said icily, "I am glad that at least you made use of the past tense. There will be no over-eating between meals in my house—at any rate not at my expense. I hope I make myself clear."

"Perfectly," retorted Cecilia, irritated with herself for precipitating his rebuke. She had fallen from grace very early in the day.

As inadvertently as she had fallen she rose again slightly soon afterwards. An uncomfortable silence had succeeded, Mostyn's heavy munching of toast resounding through the room. Mrs. Lasker sipped her tea in apparent vacuity; it did not at any rate seem to occur to her that conversation was a normal accompaniment of a meal. And Dr. Lasker's attention, though divided, was wholly taken up: he had his letters to read, his own food to masticate, the rest of the food to protect—he was not at ease, since at any moment this improvident stranger might attempt to lay a marauding hand on something that could not conveniently be removed—the toast-rack, for instance, the contents of which were reserved by long usage for Mostyn and himself—but he was certainly occupied. No remarks were to be expected from him.

Cecilia drank her tea and nibbled her piece of bread and butter—the butter so thinly spread that it could scarcely be tasted—and in her wish not to appear irritated, whatever she might feel, forgot that perhaps as a humble employée it was not for her to intrude her observations.

Trying to speak cheerily, she said at length, “I wonder if there's any news in the paper this morning.” It had seemed, when the thought first occurred to her, a fairly safe conversational gambit, and during her weary, lonely days she had found the unperturbed happenings of the world a refuge and relief: she had read the paper with diligence, though she had lighted on no further mention of

the movements either of Sir John Harland or of her supposed self.

The effect of her simple sentence was disconcerting. Mostyn stared at her as though she were some breed of curiosity, probably not human; Dr. Lasker raised his eyes and eyebrows, gave her one contemptuous look and sunk both again; Mrs. Lasker remarked flaccidly, "We don't take in a paper."

Cecilia said, "Oh," flatly and then, remembering that she had seen one on the previous evening being perused with scrupulous care by Dr. Lasker, glanced at him curiously. On one of his rapid reconnaissances of the table he encountered her look and at once interpreted it correctly.

"You are saying to yourself you saw me reading one, I perceive," he remarked pedantically, "and are trying to reconcile Mrs. Lasker's statement and your eyesight, are you not?"

"Well, I was," confessed Cecilia, feeling awkward: "you're very clever to read my thoughts so accurately."

"Humphrey is very clever," interpolated Mrs. Lasker tonelessly.

"The reconciliation is easy," remarked Dr. Lasker with complacency. "We do not take in a paper—needless extravagance. But I often pick one up, in 'buses, you know, or on seats."

Cecilia gazed at him without reply in astonishment that was akin to admiration: she could just understand the action, but not the complacency

with which it was narrated. Her gaze was for the first time pleasant to Dr. Lasker: he expanded a very little, slowly and without grace, and went on to explain, "Yes, amazing how careless people are! All the better for the careful ones."

"But on days when you don't ride in 'buses, or——"

He did not allow her to finish in his desire to claim all legitimate credit. "Oh, I don't depend on chance, Miss Brooke. I only avail myself of it when it favours me. Normally I gather the news by pausing a moment outside W. H. Smith's. Skimming the cream, I call it. It gives me all the headlines, you see, and a bit more. That's the beauty of it. No subscriptions from me, and with practice it's wonderful how much one can pick up. All practice and free; then on days when I find a paper lying about I verify my information carefully and I seldom find I've missed anything of importance. Pretty clever, eh? Why the book-stalls expose their wares puzzles me, and as for the idiots who buy their papers for my benefit—well, it takes all sorts to make a world, I say."

"It certainly does," answered Cecilia, struggling desperately to control the derision trembling in her voice: the little toad was actually proud of a stinginess that beggared belief!

"It's just these little things," he went on, "that make a man. So many won't take the trouble: they'll save on the big items and let themselves be drowned by the small. There's a way round

almost everything if you'll only take the trouble, and there's a use for everything."

"I hadn't looked at it quite like that," murmured Cecilia, feeling in an odd way ashamed for him, that he could congratulate himself openly upon a contrivance that most, if they had stooped to it at all, would have died rather than confess.

"People don't: they're so thoughtless. But you're young enough to learn." He came near to smiling upon her as an admiring pupil. "How old are you, by the way?" he shot out as an addendum.

Cecilia told him and he tucked the information away in a mind that hoarded facts as relentlessly as he guarded pennies. His brief animation ebbed, and the meal came to a cold conclusion. As soon as possible after he had himself finished eating, he rose, pounced upon everything on the table that it was possible immediately to put away, and secured it all under lock and key: he then, after a searching glance to make sure that he had omitted nothing, stepped over to his wife and whispered an intense sentence in her ear: from the look that as a consequence she turned first on Cecilia and then on the table, it was apparent that the subject was the need for being on guard against the new governess's voracity. Dr. Lasker then left the room with a briskness that indicated that he regarded Time as a commodity as little to be wasted as any other.

Cecilia caught herself wondering whether he kept count of his breathings and steps and tried to reduce their number: did he, for instance, avoid hills on principle? And was it grief to him to use up the soles of his shoes by walking? In spite of the gratuitous piece of rudeness shown in the whisper, she refused to feel low-spirited: her employer's parcimony was so extreme that it was amusing; he was a character, and she must be lacking in humour if she failed to find him a source of enjoyment. She would encourage him to repeat the exhibition of himself on a pedestal of cleverness: it would amuse her and gratify him. Her generous youth was unable—as yet—to consider him as seriously malignant.

Her musing was broken into by the lethargic voice of Mrs. Lasker, "If you've quite finished, we'll get the house straight and then you can begin with Mostyn."

A little surprised, Cecilia assented: she bade Mostyn collect his books and previous work for her inspection, told him cheerfully she would be back almost directly, and followed Mrs. Lasker upstairs. There, almost without her realising it, under the specious guise of being asked to 'lend a hand,' she was converted into a general servant. Mrs. Lasker was so lacking in vivacity that it was dreary, unconversational work, but it seemed to be a kindness, and must not, Cecilia resolved, degenerate into a habit. The morning was half over before she could shake herself free for the

duties for which she had understood herself to be engaged, and by then Mostyn had disappeared.

It was not, however, Mostyn's plan of campaign to defy her too acutely in these initial stages: he was merely, like a careful strategist, taking the measure of his new opponent. Accordingly he had not played truant altogether, but had only absented himself from her immediate neighbourhood to see if she would have either the determination to search for him or the intelligence to find him. Cecilia discovered him in about ten minutes: she first drew the house without result, then the desiccated patch of garden, and then, with rising temper, walked, hatless and impetuous, out into the road and glanced along it, first one way and then the other. Her quest was successful: Mostyn, one cheek bulging with a bull's-eye, was discovered a dozen houses down, most agreeably engaged in throwing stones at a cat. He was a poor shot and was not, greatly to his disgust, able to shift his target from its perch: with lazily scornful eyes it lay and watched his efforts—which made him so intent on its discomfiture that he was captured before he had become aware of Cecilia's swift descent.

Small boys are normally imps of mischief and gain thereby in attraction: many a one, with bulging cheek and sportive stone, can be almost irresistible, especially to a young girl who only wanted the opportunity to force a zest from life—but Mostyn was not one of these. Cecilia was vexed

with herself for her instinctive repugnance to him : she clutched him more tightly than was strictly necessary and hauled him back with her to the house. He did not, according to the custom of small boys caught in a delinquency, wriggle like an embarrassed eel or get off a long string of excuses, each thinner than the last, nor did he sulk : the abilities of a seven-year old are limited, but to an unusually full extent Mostyn Lasker looked venomous.

Glancing down at his expression Cecilia, who had fallen upon him with laughter, grew thoughtful and vexed with her own precipitancy : perhaps she had unnecessarily wounded his dignity, even though the road was empty of eye-witnesses.

"Sorry, old boy," she said in as light a tone as possible, "for descending on you so abruptly, but you mustn't throw stones at cats and you mustn't clear out when it's lesson-time."

Mostyn remained unmollified : it was clear not only that he did not accept either inhibition, but that he had no intention whatever of responding to any friendly overtures.

"I shall tell my father you pulled my coat," he muttered glumly.

It was not an encouraging start, but Cecilia declined to allow herself to become easily discouraged. She tried another tack. "Don't be so silly!" she said simply and with sufficient asperity to make Mostyn sit up sharply. It was a very long time since anybody but his father had

spoken to him like that : he had brought it on himself, he reflected, by departing from his rule of exploratory silence. He glanced at Cecilia with a hostility into which had crept a hint of very reluctant respect and obeyed her without protest when she directed him to get his lesson-books.

It did not take her long, despite this spasm of victory, to discover that she had in her pupil an interestingly exact blend of his father's meanness and his mother's lethargy : he gave away nothing, he had a memory of the true hoarder, and he was determined to take no trouble. Cecilia came speedily to the conclusion that, contrary to the opinions severally given her by Dr. and Mrs. Lasker, Mostyn was neither intelligent nor delicate nor sensitive, but rather was a cunning, coarse-grained, impervious little lout, association with whom could bring no pleasure and was practically assured of pain.

CHAPTER XIII

CECILIA had passed an unhappy Christmas three years before when she had been forced by that season of memories and associations to contrast her fatherless state with times gone by : but it was an unhappiness far healthier and less unnatural than the invading miasma of 42 Laburnum Villas. It was, she supposed, better to be there than still in the loneliness of lodgings, vainly seeking for work : she was self-supporting as long as she made no demands upon life of any kind, she received, that was to say, a little food, shelter, and a minute salary on which to dress and amuse herself and out of which all but the absolute essentials of living must come. Also she was not wholly without use in the world : she flattered herself that by dint of firmness and patience and a steady repression of her quick feeling of repugnance she was winning her pupil's regard and in so doing elevating him from the moral slough of self in which she had found him wallowing. She had done Mrs. Lasker good too, she reflected : Mrs. Lasker was neither quite so lethargic nor quite so futile as she had originally appeared ; she was waking up and would become almost human in

time. Even Dr. Lasker was not so utterly intolerable as he had seemed at first to be: the human mind had the fortunate faculty of becoming used to anything, and, though his extreme miserliness failed to develop, as it had first promised, into a source of enjoyment, still it remained an interesting study, and the little man had intelligence. But when every helpful factor had been put into the scale—and Cecilia tried so very hard to keep a smiling heart and to give full value to anything that had any value at all—the truth emerged, like a rib of rock in a murky sea, that it was hardly possible to imagine any home that had less of the spirit of Christmas in it than 42 Laburnum Villas.

To Dr. Lasker the whole season was a torment: the shop windows, with all their incitements to extravagance of every kind, genuinely pained him; he would go out of his way to avoid them. And, as Christmas Day came very near, he took refuge in an armour of moroseness and once was even guilty of tearing up angrily a sheet of newspaper he had found because it was covered with alluring advertisements: when it was in fragments he was stricken with remorse—it would have served, as usual with such finds, to be doled out for fire-lighting—not that fires, even in the depth of winter, were either many or generous at his house. In furious disgust, first with mankind and then with himself, he was reduced to fashioning the fragments carefully into spills. As he eschewed all luxuries for himself as well as for all others and consequently

spent no money on tobacco, and as he was also most rigorously watchful of the use of matches for any purpose whatsoever, it was not apparent to what practical end the spills would ever be devoted. They appeased his conscience, however, though they failed to improve his temper. Except in the necessary course of his profession he seldom spoke during these days for fear that he should give an opportunity for a reminder or—more exasperating still—a direct request, and he turned on Cecilia savagely when he chanced to overhear her saying to Mostyn, “Haven’t you yet thought what you’re going to give your mother for Christmas?”

“Give, give!” he interjected. “That’s all this younger generation thinks about! Don’t put such insane ideas into his head: that’s not what you’re paid for. Next thing’ll be, he’ll be asking me for money.”

“Yet you say that Mostyn’s intelligent,” she answered swiftly, too offended at the rudeness of his tone to mince her words. “Mostyn knows that’d be useless, but he might make something. After all a mother’s a mother, and Christmas——”

“—is a season for fools,” he snapped, “glad of any excuse for their folly.”

“Mostyn might even give you something,” she persisted.

“He’ll not get anything back—no tricks of that kind!”

“Dr. Lasker,” then said Cecilia, quite sincerely curious, “d’you always think along those lines?”

For answer he gave her a balefully intent look which carried with it an atmosphere so coldly malicious that she felt momentarily afraid : without a word he turned on his heel and left her. She tried to be sorry that she had descended to exchange retorts with her employer, but only succeeded in being sore as well as annoyingly uneasy : she did not like that silent departure ; she would much have preferred an indignant reproof. Then she remembered Mostyn : a small boy, told abruptly that he was certainly not going to receive any Christmas presents, whatever his previous lack of expectancy, might reasonably be presumed to be unhappy and even resentful. Cecilia turned to Mostyn with more of a fellow-feeling than she had yet experienced, meaning to comfort him as far as she could without showing a father up in too unfavourable a light to his son. Instead of a wounded affection or a rebuffed acquisitiveness she saw, to her vast vexation, that Mostyn's whole attention was directed in cynical amusement to her discomfiture. Mostyn was not given to laughter, but his eyes were alight with enjoyment.

" You little beast ! " came out irrepressibly from Cecilia's lips : to be gloated over as a victim by Mostyn was the last straw. She regretted her little ebullition the moment the syllables had left her lips : it was undignified and useless. But it made, as she was already aware, no real difference. If Mostyn could at once side with his father's views, even in his own despite on such an issue, her idea

that her influence was elevating him in any way was pure vanity. She saw in that second exactly what Mostyn thought of her: she knew that between her outlook and his was a great gulf fixed, not to be crossed by him whatever ropes of rescue she threw over, and she found herself energetically thanking Heaven that she was not as this small child.

She knew also from that single balefully intent look fixed upon her by Dr. Lasker that he was dangerous, that he would do her an evil turn if he could and that it behoved her to beware that she gave him no opportunity. Of the inmates of the household Mrs. Lasker alone remained: of the three she seemed by far the least harmful, and yet it was from her that Cecilia's next most unpleasant experience was derived. Resolve as she might that she would not allow herself to degenerate from a governess into a general drudge, Cecilia found it impossible to prevent the one from being forced continually into the other: the only remedy was resignation, and that she was in no way yet ready to contemplate. She had made no new acquaintances, she was given no time in which to make them; she was compelled for the present to remain with the Laskers. And a great part of each day was unavoidably taken up by the need for doing those household duties that Mrs. Lasker's lethargy declined to undertake: Mrs. Lasker proved highly skilful in methods of helpless suggestion. If the household were to carry on at all without a descent into squalor some one had to work in it.

Mrs. Lasker never openly repudiated her responsibility; she merely removed herself gradually from beneath it, 'slithering like a slug from under a boot,' thought Cecilia indignantly. So it usually happened that, whilst Cecilia worked hard solely from motives of decency and self-respect, Mrs. Lasker hung about with an appearance of doing likewise, which deceived no one, except herself. She was great, she said, on detail, which, being interpreted, meant that she had an insatiable curiosity about trifles, especially when they did not concern her in the least.

Cecilia's locked trunk was a source of infinite speculation to her: whenever she was near it, dusting or pretending to tidy up after Mostyn, she tried it; but, as Cecilia had in it only the treasures she could not now wear and therefore had no real occasion to go to it, Mrs. Lasker's curiosity was baffled. She employed, when all else failed, the direct method, but Cecilia put her off by the careless answer of, "In there? Oh, only some old things I don't want at present." That should have been an adequate answer, since Cecilia had been provided with nothing for her clothes but the cheapest little chest of drawers procurable. Mrs. Lasker, however, had never for one moment forgotten, even as Cecilia grew shabby, the impression made upon her by the new governess on first arrival. She had resented her then; she had known her as altogether superior to herself; she resented her still, and was convinced in her

slow, jealous mind that the reasons that had driven Cecilia down to this unenviable employment were discreditable. She was convinced also that the evidence was hidden away in this never-opened trunk.

Twice she tried the experiment of bursting suddenly in upon Cecilia just as the latter was going to bed. The first time she apologised, saying she had thought she had heard Mostyn, who slept in a small room beyond, crying out : the second time she upbraided Cecilia, quite in Dr. Lasker's own manner, for keeping the electric light burning so long. On both occasions she was completely unsuccessful in surprising any secrets out of the trunk. But it was not an expensive or unusual trunk, and it was her duty, she told herself casuistically, to know all that there was to be known about her only son's governess : she did not remember also to tell herself that she had been entirely apathetic about that governess's selection, which had been made solely by Dr. Lasker and solely on his invariable principle of buying the cheapest article obtainable.

Thus it came about that, returning one afternoon from a walk with Mostyn unexpectedly, owing to a sudden squall of rain, Cecilia flung open the door of her room to discover Mrs. Lasker on her knees beside the trunk. A bundle of keys swung successfully from the lock and the lid was up, exposing to view the glories of the folded sable coat. At Cecilia's sharp exclamation Mrs. Lasker turned clumsily but swiftly round and then Cecilia exclaimed

again: she could hardly recognize her ordinarily pallid, lymphatic employer in the woman, enflamed with covetousness and envy, who stared back at her, disconcerted at her entry but doggedly tenacious of her position beside the discovered treasure.

Cecilia found her voice first. "May I ask what you're doing at my box?" she inquired, controlling her vast indignation as best she could: that her coat, John's present, should be spied upon by those greedy eyes seemed to her at that instant quite irrationally an outrage. She knew, directly she had spoken, that she had been foolish to ask such a question: it admitted of no answer and therefore received none.

"What have you got in here?" demanded Mrs. Lasker, so envious that her voice was a quavering spasm of desire.

The extent and character of her emotion were so obvious that Cecilia pulled herself sharply together. "That?" she answered with a good simulation of contempt. "My old coat? Is that what you're bothering about? Where else should I keep it? And why are you investigating my things, please?"

"I've—I've a right to," responded Mrs. Lasker thickly. "It's my house, isn't it?" She turned to the trunk again, doubt in her eyes: never in a million years would she possess a sable coat; she might be mistaken, but no, she was sure she was not. Perhaps it would be as well, though, to pretend to be.

"It's—it's a good coat," she managed to ejaculate.

"Is it?" replied Cecilia with exaggerated carelessness.

"How did you get it?"

"It was given me."

The two sentences, question and answer, were like a rapier thrust and parry. Cecilia was wondering whether she could endure it; it might almost be better to face once more the rigours of the cold world than to remain subject to such despicable espionage: Mrs. Lasker was wondering by what means she could possibly spirit away such a treasure—to gloat over in secret, hidden from her husband even as Cecilia was forced to hide it. Both had forgotten Mostyn who, standing silently behind Cecilia, had lost nothing of the episode.

Mrs. Lasker could not resist the degree of her temptation: she turned back to the trunk, drawn irresistibly and, putting down her hand trembling with desire, picked up the coat before Cecilia could intervene. From among its folds tumbled a small cardboard box. This fell open and out of it scattered an emerald pendant of great beauty, hung on a slender gold chain, and two rings, one of which rolled away under the bed.

With a furious exclamation Cecilia dived for the first ring, the simple circle of gold which stood for that strange ceremony in a crowded church, already in the dark, unhappy days of the present growing dream-like and fantastic in her memory. She snatched it up and sprang erect, with angry spots of colour on each cheek and the light of battle in

her eyes. To her relief the simplicity of the wedding-ring appeared to have safeguarded her from the worst of prying curiosity: the whole of Mrs. Lasker's attention was concentrated now upon the great emerald. She had, however, her hands full of sable and, by the time she had remembered to drop that, Cecilia's hands had taken her pendant also into her own custody. The engagement-ring that had rolled under the bed could be retrieved later: the first thing for Cecilia to do was to get that odious lump of greedy womanhood out of her room. She spoke with great decision and dignity.

"Unless I can have my room to myself, Mrs. Lasker, without this sort of thing, it will be impossible for me to remain another hour in this house."

Over Mrs. Lasker's mind, temporarily obscured by the stifled concupiscence of great possessions, came the illuminating, if alarming, thought of her husband. This girl was by far the cheapest and the most generally useful of the many who had made their procession through that loveless, arid abode: and she meant what she said. Mrs. Lasker was no practised reader in psychology, but there could be no mistaking Cecilia's determination. Unless she were smoothed down, she would go, and go at once: Mrs. Lasker might even be faced with the terror of meeting her husband on his return from his round and endeavouring to explain to him not merely that she had cost him this admirable servant but also the reason. He would have it all out of her. Her knees turned to water at the bare idea of letting him

know that she had allowed possessions of such value to be taken out of the house: Humphrey would torture her for much less. Something ameliorating must be said immediately: words cost nothing.

"I apologize, Miss Brooke," she said as promptly as this panic of reasoning allowed. "A mother's qualms, you know. Mostyn's all I have, and I felt it my duty——" she broke off, not knowing how best to put into speech the burden of her irresistible curiosity.

Cecilia had not the least wish to press matters to a conclusion. Her anger had outrun her judgment: she had seen mentally the dragging out before these detestable people of the whole miserable business of her marriage and its disaster: rather than endure that she was prepared to leave at once, unpaid, and without hope. But that seemed to have escaped notice, and she was willing, indeed eager, to forget the rest.

"Quite," she said abruptly. "Well, I think we understand each other. These things, which were given to me in other circumstances, are my own affair. They don't make for happiness, but in there they don't matter to anybody. Anyway, you've satisfied your qualms; and that's all there is to it."

"Exactly, and you're not offended, Miss Brooke? You won't leave or say anything to my husband? He might not understand. In fact, he'd be very angry."

Cecilia, only too anxious to get the undignified episode over, reading aright the suppressed woman's

panic and sharing it in some degree herself, took pity on her, assented cheerfully and, cutting short her further apologies, assisted her from the room. In that act she discovered Mostyn.

"Well," she said as she closed the door on his mother, "so you were there, were you?"

She gave him a shrewd look and was pleased to note the apparent absence of all interest on his face. This was unusual: Mostyn might say little, but he had a kind of low cunning that was seldom without its evidence on his expression. It meant, she hoped, that the value of sables was as yet unknown to him and that she had happened to be between him and the emerald. She was relieved: his curiosity would be an even more unpleasant manifestation than his mother's. He did not reply and she let the matter drop.

Mostyn passed into his room and through the key-hole watched maliciously, first, the groping for and recovery of the ring that had rolled under the bed, secondly, the peculiarly pained look with which his governess gazed at it, and thirdly the curious gesture, half-fascinated, half-repelled, with which she lifted it nearly to her lips and then lowered it again with a spasmodic jerk. Such contortions, though pleasurable, were of slight interest to the deeper side of Mostyn's mind: they had no cash value and therefore no message to him. What seemed to him of real significance was the long look that she had bestowed on the big emerald and the care with which she replaced it in her trunk.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER the emotional stress of the discovery of Mrs. Lasker's afternoon employment, Cecilia felt that the worst of a very disagreeable situation had been experienced and overcome. From Mrs. Lasker she received a disarming deference which made forgiveness easy. Cecilia was sorry for the wretched woman, existing obviously in terror of an unspeakably mean man. She did not forget the look she herself had received from him, but he seemed to regret the brief discussion that had caused it, actually presented Mostyn with a second-hand book without boasting of the manner in which he had procured it, and embarrassed Cecilia dreadfully by his Christmas present to her. With a show of gallantry that she found most unedifying he greeted her on Christmas morning with,

"And here's something for you, Miss Brooke. I've kept it specially ever since that amusing little question of yours the other day. No one shall ever say I'm quick to take offence." With a smirk that, as the cold little glitter in his eyes showed, was wholly on the surface, he produced a fashionable illustrated weekly magazine and handed it to her across the table. She could not but take it and

search her vocabulary for some words that would sound suitably grateful without too direct a perjury. But she felt with vast annoyance that, at neither cost nor trouble to himself, Dr. Lasker had contrived to rehabilitate his position in his own eyes and put her in a false one. The magazine was not new, it was not only dated December 10, but had upon it marks as of having been dropped accidentally in the mud which not all Dr. Lasker's care could remove : moreover, she had seen him reading it meticulously through himself. To have it handed to her now as a gift reflecting credit on the giver was exasperating to the last degree. Cecilia could not help adding to her lame words of thanks an appreciation of his memory. "I hardly thought," she said, "my little question deserved to be remembered."

"Humphrey has a good memory," observed Mrs. Lasker lifelessly.

"There is little that concerns me that I ever forget," he remarked ; and there was that in his tone, for all the quietness of the complacency, which gave Cecilia, greatly against her will, a most disagreeable little feeling of fear. As soon as possible she escaped from the breakfast-table to her bedroom.

What a drab little room it was ! No pictures, no ornaments, the wall-paper flaking dirtily off in strips, looking as though it had never been clean even when new years before the day of Dr. Lasker. In one corner of the ceiling the plaster was crumbling down exhausted ; over the window

was a torn roller-blind, hopelessly stuck, all askew, with the string off. And this was Cecilia's own room!

She hated it, but had grown hardened to it. She kept it as clean as she could, and let it go at that. Now she sat down on the bed and, in spite of her exasperation, felt that she was glad to possess the magazine, her one Christmas present. It took her away from her actual surroundings to that world into which she had momentarily stepped and from which she had dramatically banished herself, '*le monde qui s'amuse*,' she muttered; 'how strange it seems.' Idly she turned over the pages, looking with misty eyes at the photographs of gay and fashionable folk. She was not stabbed by the contrast; to be envious of that which she had resigned seemed to her a weakness that she felt she had overcome. But in that moment the vision of John Harland returned to her with a vividness for which she was unprepared. For days together now, in the unceasing pressure of the labours exacted from her, he had become to her thought, as in reality he seemed to be, one who was dead, one whom she had loved long ago when she was young and who had passed naturally from life and from her: and then some chance phrase or sight would suddenly not only release the rays of truth but also recall his features distinctly before her. At night, in that difficult half-hour when the mind has no longer firm grip over reality and fact and fancy begin to blend, he continually presented himself to her. But neither by day nor night had

she for long had so penetrating a remembrance as on this Christmas morning.

Unable to bear it, she hastily struggled to recall herself to reality by fixing her eyes definitely upon the pages of the magazine: she felt in that instant that she had never before realized just how he had looked; for all her later knowledge, brought to her by such singular chance and by the most harsh irony brought half a day too late, she saw him in this remembrance with his strong face warmed by kindness and his eyes alight with laughter. It was so, she assured herself desperately, only because every man with whom she had been brought into contact since she dropped from the train had been of such a repellent stamp: but it made memory bitter and the present even more detestable than she had forced it normally to seem.

She turned the page and then felt with a half-shudder that she had been undergoing a psychic experience of a minor character—she was looking down at a photograph of John Harland, and obviously that had projected its impression upon her mind. He did not look unhappy, that was her first thought and it was disquietingly painful: she was neither so selfish nor so revengeful, she said to herself fiercely, as to wish that he did. But she fancied that his look was directly the reverse, he seemed to eyes into which the tears would come in spite of all resistance to be young and gay, very much the contented bachelor sauntering in the sunshine. That was a real turning of the knife in

the wound. Here was she, after weeks of poignancy, strain, and solitude, slaving away as a subordinate in a hateful household and glad to have even that employment, and there was he, idle, prosperous, unaffected. Always the way, she thought bitterly, even in the twentieth-century world in which women had flung off so many of the old chains, they, the innocent, paid and men, the guilty, escaped scot-free. Where was he? Cecilia could not at first make out the legend under the photograph: the print swam too mistily before her. Indignantly she dashed her hand across her eyes and read, "Sir John Harland, whose marriage was the social event of last autumn, at Accra, where Lady Harland and he are enjoying an unusual honeymoon."

Accra? Where in the world was that? And what could be the meaning of the continued association of herself with him? Surely the newspapers and periodicals were indulging in strangely unjustifiable surmises: they heard of his arrival or saw him, and at once assumed that he was accompanied by his bride. She could not recall exactly what the three paragraphs seen the third day after her flight had described her as doing or about to do: she only remembered that their accounts had agreed in ignorance of the catastrophic end of the marriage. It would seem from this later social magazine that the world at large was still in ignorance of it. But Accra? That sounded familiar and yet was not. India? No; she was thinking of Agra. She

looked at the photograph again more closely and saw that it was tropical. This was puzzling: it was not until she was able to look in the index to a geography that she solved it. The west coast of Africa? What in the world was he doing there? He had, she knew, many interests, and had travelled widely in the years before she had met him: few places had come up for mention but he had seemed to have been to them once at least. She supposed that, unable to remain wifeless and exposed either to curiosity or ridicule, he had slipped immediately out of England to as far off a spot as possible. "Escaping the fogs," the page was headed: it had other photographs of other folk of fashion in other sunny places. Cecilia laid it down with a short, swiftly suppressed sob: yes, it was true, the sun did shine for other people. And Accra was terribly remote. She turned back to her life at 42 Laburnum Villas, feeling cold and utterly alone.

Upon one thing, dwelling perpetually within herself upon this incident, Cecilia was resolved. Since John Harland was now at the other end of the world, she would run no risk of being sought out by him, were she to give a clue to her whereabouts. She could, she thought dully, even return now to London and there seek for a post that would be both better and among less objectionable people. But there she would be equally unknown unless she went to old colleagues or acquaintances to whom she would have to expose her story, and that she was resolved to bury with her. Besides, that would

be a confession of failure, and she had a very healthy strain of obstinacy in her composition ; she would somehow twist the fates into something less diametrically the opposite of happiness than they were at present. She would not return to London, she would stay on where she was, for the time being at least ; but she would no longer retain that sable coat, the possession of which was a burden to her and such a stimulant to jealousy and greed to Mrs. Lasker. It was neither right nor wise to keep it : it provoked passion both in Mrs. Lasker and herself. Mrs. Lasker longed for it, and Cecilia could not endure the memory of Mrs. Lasker's eyes and, worse still, hands upon it. Love John Harland or hate him—and which she did she did not know—of this at least she was sure, that it irked her inexpressibly to have his gift to her the storehouse of such unenviable feeling : it degraded both him and her. It had been given her in an hour of blessedness : she wished to remember that and nothing more.

She was resolved to part with it, to give to Mrs. Lasker an ease that lady did not desire and relief to herself, and to carry out that resolution without further delay. She had meant all along to restore it to its giver : now there was no longer any reason why she should not, and there had arisen every reason why she should. But she must do so secretly. Its place in her trunk, its present ownership, and its future destination were nothing whatever to do with any Lasker : but she had enough acquaintance with the Doctor and his wife and in

consequence a sufficiently low opinion of both to feel it possible that, if either knew of her intention, they would try to prevent her. It would be positive pain to both in their respective ways that such a piece of wealth should go from their house. They could not hope to succeed in keeping it, of course, but they could ask awkward questions, make unpleasant insinuations, and generally embarrass her. As a result of these thoughts Cecilia went to work quietly, watched her opportunity carefully and succeeded a couple of days after Christmas in getting her coat, securely fastened, into the post and away to John Harland's London address without Mrs. Lasker's knowledge. There were only two offshoots to the episode, one of which might have come equally from another cause and the other of which was entirely hidden from her. She got caught in a heavy rain-storm returning from her secret expedition to the post, and Mostyn had spied on her through the key-hole throughout her wrapping up of the coat when alone in her room the previous evening. These two offshoots, seemingly unrelated, converged rapidly and bore most bitter fruit.

As she sped back to 42 Laburnum Villas Cecilia felt easier in mind than for several weeks past : she had despatched the coat, to which she had pinned an envelope for the 'personal and private eye of Sir John Harland.' In this she had put a slip of paper with the words, 'I am sending this back simply because I do not feel it right that I should keep gifts

of such great value, which were given to me in other circumstances for my personal use.' Into the pocket of the coat, unseen by Mostyn, who nearly put his eye out straining to observe every detail, but was, for all that, unable to overcome the maddening interposition of the corners of the lid of the trunk, she had slipped the pendant, knotting it, for security's sake, in her best handkerchief : as she had done so, she had wondered where the case, which had been in her new trunk on the train, now was and what was happening to the trousseau she had never worn.

She had slipped out of the house in too much of a hurry and flutter to remember her umbrella, and the heaviness of the rain, as she returned, was unexpected. At first she did not mind it, she even tried to enjoy it as symbolical, a washing away of the past, of which she now retained nothing, absolutely nothing except her wedding-ring, her engagement-ring, which was a half-hoop of good, but not great, rubies, and the residue of Aunt Emily's donation. The first was of no value to anyone, not even to her, but it had inscribed on its inner side the date of her wedding and the two names ' Cecilia—John ' : it could do no one harm if she retained that secretly to her death. The second she could not bring herself to part with : she had worn it for a whole month, the happiest she had ever known or could know ; it had to her the value of a view from Pisgah, it should lie in secret fellowship with the ring of mockery till both were buried with her. The third was her one bulwark against outrageous

fortune : one day she would repay the whole donation, but to return the residue now would be quixotism.

Such were Cecilia's thoughts as she left the post-office and plunged into the street and the rain. But soon the downpour was unpleasant. She did not like to take shelter in a doorway or she would run the risk of being missed and questioned, and she was afraid she was a poor liar. She hurried on and was completely wet through before she got back. On arrival two trumpery causes intervened to prevent her changing as she had meant : she had not had time even to slip off her coat before she was called in the high, plaintive voice that Mostyn adopted whenever he wished to make himself specially obnoxious to her. He was supposed to be in bed and asleep, and he wanted for nothing ; she saw that at once and was about vexedly to leave him, when he said with a sharpness of curiosity that Dr. Lasker termed intelligence and Cecilia precocity,

"Where have you been ?"

"Never you mind," she answered shortly. "Go to sleep at once."

"You've been out : you're all wet." Mostyn began to giggle ; she was in discomfort, an entirely sufficient cause for merriment.

"Go to sleep," she repeated.


"I know where you've been," he could not help saying.

"I'm sure you don't," she answered with emphasis and truth : that she was spied upon by Mostyn

as well as by Mrs. Lasker had never crossed her mind.

Mostyn did not follow up his advantage: he knew where she had been and, he might have added, why. But he had already departed from his principles in saying as much as he had: his departure, he reflected sleepily a few minutes later as he snuggled down in contentment, was abundantly justified; he had teased and chilled his governess, and he hated her not only because she did govern him, but still more because she was very pretty and full of refinement and grace.

With a sigh Cecilia regained her room and hastily discarded her soaking coat and skirt. At this point in her changing Mrs. Lasker came and with a plain-tiveness akin to Mostyn's asked for assistance with the supper, and stood by watching the rest of Cecilia's toilet in the helpless apathy that was so exasperating. Impatiently Cecilia went downstairs, not caring enough about herself to stay and change her shoes and stockings in that cold and disagreeable presence. Before the uneasy meal was over, she was concealing from the observant eyes of Dr. Lasker a slight shiver that was ominous.



CHAPTER XV

IN the middle of the night Cecilia sat up suddenly, suppressing a cry. Sleep would not visit her ; she was chilly and restless, and her mind as well as her body would give her no ease. She kept harking back over the irremediable past in a way which she was able in the strength of day to subdue, and a sudden thought stabbed her. She had now seen not one but several paragraphs or references, not to Sir John Harland alone but to Lady Harland also. She had assumed them to be mistakes, but was it not possible that it was she who was mistaken ? That he was married and now accompanied by his wife ? In other words, that she had never been Lady Harland because there had been a Lady Harland in existence at the time when she was going through the marriage ceremony ? Was not that the explanation of these references that had so perplexed her, that he had immediately sought out and joined forces again with the woman in the train, whose legitimate place she had so ignorantly usurped, and that the newspapers referred not to her, Cecilia Brooke, but to that other whose image and speech were indelibly impressed upon her brain ? What terrible questions ! If that were so, she had never

been married ; she had been tricked into a meaningless ceremony. That thought entered, but was rejected : it was impossible. John could not have consciously played out that solemn farce before all his relations and a great crowd of friends. He must have believed the woman dead. He was only as all men, not a cad unspeakable.

But had he married that woman or not ? Cecilia racked her memory to recall exactly what words she had used concerning him, concerning also her reason for coming from Canada : at the time, and immediately afterwards, they had seemed to Cecilia burnt in like acid upon her, never to be erased : and already they were blurred and undecipherable. She thought the woman had conveyed that she had not been married to him ; but she could not now be sure. Did it matter ? Did it make it better or worse ? Cecilia did not know. If only she could sleep, if only she did not feel so ill !

There was perhaps one way to decide : she had laid the magazine down when she had come to that photograph of John at Accra, and had looked no further ; perhaps there was another mention, a further photograph, showing not only Sir John Harland but also the wife by whom he was accompanied. Unable to lie still, Cecilia got up, switched on the light, found the magazine, and turned over all its pages. There was no other photograph or mention. She had not been many minutes, but she realized as she got back into bed that she had committed an act of folly : her teeth were chattering

and she was altogether numb with cold. The search, however, had in some measure quietened her brain : after tossing some while longer she fell at last into an uneasy sleep.

When she awoke it was to cold and misery. She knew that she had caught a violent chill and she suspected that she was running a temperature ; and she felt consummately wretched. In any ordinary household, whether she were present in it as guest, familiar, or servant, she would have remained in bed without scruple or hesitation ; but at the Laskers to do so was impossible. That Dr. Lasker would have hailed any such proof of indisposition as a happy opportunity for saving even the small amount of food that she normally was given to eat would have mattered little ; she did not feel equal to eating anything. But she would have received neither attention nor mercy : she would have been utterly neglected as regards all needs and heartily abused for failing in her duties. Even now, Mostyn was querulously calling to her : with a groan she got up, silenced him, and began to dress.

Dr. Lasker gave her one of his sharp glances, as cutting and as unfeeling as a piece of steel, as she entered the breakfast-room, and then very pointedly ignored her. He saw that she was seriously unwell and was terrified lest he should be betrayed into giving her some medical advice free. He divided the time he allowed for breakfast between his food, his letters, and his cogitation as to the best tactics : if only she would ask for his opinion, he could

deduct the fee from her salary. Cecilia, equally terrified lest he should notice her state and offer to treat it, never opened her lips except to force herself to swallow some tea.

After breakfast she tried with pallid resolution to evade Mrs. Lasker and, neglecting all else, to get through with her work with Mostyn. She had a splitting headache and the print on the pages of the lesson-book swam so that she could scarcely make out the words. Mostyn was quick to appreciate that she was not herself and showed considerable cleverness in maintaining a pose of a student resolutely trying to learn but unable to understand his teacher. For nearly an hour Cecilia struggled on, fighting against all the demons of irritation and despair: she longed terribly to smack her pupil as he had never yet been smacked and found it increasingly difficult to refrain. Mostyn, skirting ingeniously just outside obvious offence, enjoyed himself hugely and was quite disappointed when his mother entered and heavily intervened.

"You might give me a hand a moment, Miss Brooke," she said with plaintive insistence: "I'm all behind this morning."

A dozen times had Cecilia vowed that she would make a stand against this sort of intolerable imposition, and then had postponed the battle till a more favourable moment. On this occasion she sprang up gladly with a "Certainly; you finish this, Mostyn," and pushed the exercise across the table.

The room quavered around her and she nearly

fell, but the table saved her, and she followed Mrs. Lasker, for once indifferent to the insolent grin with which Mostyn, not even waiting till her back was turned, closed the book and tipped back his chair.

Cecilia had expected that she was needed, as usual, for the routine housework, but to her annoyance she found Mrs. Lasker preceding her into the kitchen, where the breakfast things were piled in a slovenly fashion on a tray and still unwashed. This was a new departure in idleness: hitherto she had not been required also to be kitchen-maid.

Whilst she stood hesitating, Mrs. Lasker resolved her doubts by saying with an assumption of brightness, "Now we'll soon get done, won't we? Wonderful what a difference a second pair of hands makes. If you'll just take those, I'll be able to get on."

Mrs. Lasker was a wonderful woman, thought Cecilia half-admiringly: as tenaciously mean in her own way as her husband and a past-mistress in the art of pretence: it was evident that she sincerely believed that she was a hard and selfless worker. Oh, well, what did it matter? What did anything matter? Washing up was at least easier than wrestling so maddeningly with that callous little beast, Mostyn. Wearily Cecilia bent to her new and humble task.

She completed it at length and, absorbed in her own sensations, was about to leave the kitchen when she was stopped by Mrs. Lasker.

"You're not going, Miss Brooke?"

Cecilia started and came out of her trance. "Why, yes," she answered slowly; "Mostyn's waiting——"

"Let him wait," replied Mrs. Lasker rather curtly. "He's good at that and I'm not. Just give a hand to this a moment."

The old formula. How many times a day had it not rung in Cecilia's ears! Why couldn't the woman even be honest enough to ask outright that others should do her work for her? 'This' was the unappetizing dish that would presently be set before them all at lunch. The very idea of lunch was at that moment abhorrent to Cecilia; to stand over its smell prematurely quite impossible.

"I'm sorry; I'm not feeling well," she said faintly.

"Nor am I; I seldom do, but I don't complain," rejoined Mrs. Lasker, eyeing her without sympathy and standing lymphatically in the way to the door.

"I'm not up to doing your work to-day as well as my own," was Cecilia's quick response. "Let me pass, please: I'm going to my room."

It was revolution: she knew it, but she did not care. She was past caring, and what she said was true; she was greatly afraid that she was going to faint.

"Your work!" retorted Mrs. Lasker, considerably aggrieved. "Helping me is your work. You don't imagine we can afford to keep you just to look after Mostyn."

"I don't imagine anything," said Cecilia wearily.

Heavens, would this awful woman never move out of the way? "I'm not well, I tell you."

Very grudgingly Mrs. Lasker moved herself about a foot, saying with extreme surliness, "You can't be ill here. That'd never do, never do at all."

Visions of having to do not only her natural work but Cecilia's also, memories of servantless days and her husband's cold anger with her, tugged and tore at her vitals. If the girl were ill, she must get better at once. Perhaps it would be best to let her go upstairs now: Mrs. Lasker was terribly divided. Not bothering another second about her employer the instant there was room without actually pushing her aside Cecilia slipped from the kitchen and went dizzily up the narrow stairs to her room.

Dominant among her flickering impressions was her determination to refuse, at all costs, any ministrations by Dr. Lasker that might be offered. From the first she had felt that there was something cold and cruel, something almost reptilian about him which was wholly repellent: indeed, she thought that she had seen many snakes that she had liked much better. She would not have reckoned him as human but for the undeniable fact that, expensive as a son must inevitably be, yet Dr. Lasker was to quite an unaccountable degree proud of, and even attached to, Mostyn.

Cecilia threw open the door of her room intending to fling herself on the bed, gather all the warmth she could and try to rest and restore to normality

her aching body and throbbing head. Instead she was galvanized into activity: bending over her trunk, the lid of which to her relief was still down, stood Mostyn, bunch of keys in hand. The remnants of control gave way: the antipathy this uninviting boy always inspired in her, the exasperation to which he had that morning remorselessly subjected her, the attitude in which he was, her weary disgust with Mrs. Lasker, and her state of health all combined in one sudden great spurt of anger. She dashed across the room, seized the offending little spier by his coat-collar, jerked him unceremoniously forward so that he was bent across the trunk at a convenient angle, and then with the accession of strength born of rage she held him there, howling at the top of his voice as though he were being murdered, a vocal effort begun before he had been hurt at all and continued long after he had ceased to feel the tingle of her little hand, whilst she spanked him as energetically as ever she could contrive. It was a delicious moment; it was balm to all the wounds that Life had inflicted upon her.

"You horrid little spy!" she exclaimed, pantingly, "I'll teach you to meddle with my things!"

Across the sound of her voice, the resonance of her spansks, and the expostulatory howling of her victim came unexpectedly the cold, acid tones of Dr. Lasker, "And what is the meaning of this, please?"

Turning, ceasing to spank and allowing Mostyn

to straighten up though without relinquishing her hold upon his collar, Cecilia saw Dr. Lasker standing grimly curious and self-contained upon the threshold.

"He was trying to open my trunk!" she exclaimed, still panting hard from her exertion.

"Indeed?" queried Dr. Lasker icily. He surveyed Mostyn with one of his keen, quick glances: the eyes of father and son met. "Mostyn," commanded Dr. Lasker without a wisp of emotion in his steely voice, "come with me."

He bore Mostyn off and Cecilia, for the first time thanking heaven that she had such a cold-blooded beast for her employer and thinking that Mostyn would at last really meet with his due reward, sank gratefully down upon her bed. She had no strength or mind to undress: weakness and weariness descended in clouds upon her. She drew up the thin and torn eiderdown and tried to compose herself to sleep.

Ten minutes later when she had regained her breath and was slightly quietening down and warming up, she was roused by a sharp, insistent knock on her door.

"Am I not to be left alone for a moment?" she asked herself, flooded with intense resentment. She sat up and cried angrily, 'Come in!'

She was unprepared for the swift entry of Dr. Lasker. He shot her a glance of defiant hostility and said crisply, "You are discharged! You are insolent to my wife and you strike my son. You

will leave my house in half an hour or I will bring a summons against you for assault ! ”

Cecilia could hardly believe her ears. “ What ! ” she cried in astonishment.

“ You heard,” he said coldly.

Her impulsive blood flamed in her cheeks : all lassitude left her, she arose from her bed in a single bound, red and royally angry. “ How dare you ? ” she cried. “ Leave your house in half an hour ? D’you think I’d stay in it five minutes after being insulted in this way ? Pay me my wages, get me a cab, and I’ll be gone at once ! ”

Dr. Lasker started and glared furiously at her even as she was furiously glaring at him. A fearful struggle was evident upon his features : at last he jerked out painfully, “ Very well. Only at once, mind. I will call a cab now.” And he ran out of the room.

Cecilia was too entirely given to anger to wonder at such an uncharacteristic yielding : she flung her meagre possessions in all haste into her trunk, empty now of all except her little hand-bag, which had lain long concealed under the sable coat, and into her suit-case, and dragged both to the door. There she found Dr. Lasker stationed : he seized her trunk without a word, bumped it with speed and despatch down the stairs and round to the front door. By the time she had followed with her suit-case the trunk was on a taxi-cab that stood in the street waiting for her.

Dr. Lasker, with shining eyes, rigid brow, and

protuberant jaw, then thrust into her hand, with a sudden spasm that revealed the infinite reluctance with which he parted with them, two treasury notes of £1 each. "There's your wages," he snapped fiercely: "you've not earned them, but I won't argue the point. Good-bye."

He turned hurriedly on his heel, darted back to the house, and slammed the door ferociously behind him. Feeling positively sick and infinitely ashamed that an Englishman could be so revoltingly unkind, Cecilia got into the cab and drove away. She went first to her former lodgings and found them occupied: it took her a good while of driving about before she lighted on others. These were less humble and therefore more expensive; but she could not wander further. She would seek fresh rooms and fresh work to-morrow, she thought; to-day she was too ill, too wretched. The cabman, little disposed to friendliness towards a servant thrown out of her house with ignominy, raucously insisted on one of her treasury notes as payment for the extended drive. It was not until late that night that, full of cold and feeling as if all her limbs had been racked, she began feebly to unpack some of her things. She had the other treasury note loose in her possession and she opened her hand-bag to put it safely with the residue of Aunt Emily's donation. She drew out the envelope, then her heart went suddenly down, down, down until it seemed to her as though all her blood were pouring out of her feet—the envelope was empty. £1 stood

between her and destitution : she had been robbed of all else that she had.

That same evening, in his locked surgery with the shutters carefully bolted over the windows, Dr. Lasker sat rubbing his hands and occasionally putting out one of his fingers and delicately touching the entrancing, crisp surface of new £5 notes. Ten of them ! £50, and he had got them for £2—and that £2 he would have had to pay out in any case ! Glorious ! And got from that superior, insolent little minx who had had the effrontery to twit him, her employer, for his practice of economy : he had indeed paid his debt in full.

Clever of him to have hustled her so : that had avoided all trouble ! And clever Mostyn ! She had never appreciated his son, but the little fellow had outwitted her completely. She had thought Mostyn was only trying to open her trunk and had said so, whereas Mostyn had opened it and was finished and just about to leave. Clever Mostyn indeed ! Not a word had he said, just one look later to his father, which was quite enough. That fool of a woman, his mother, had let valuable coat and valuable jewel go ; that was a bitter pill, but Mostyn had redeemed the situation to some degree. A great pity that he had not told his father all about his mother's earlier searchings, a still greater pity that he had not sneaked down to that same ingenious father as soon as ever he saw the girl packing up her coat. But at any rate Mostyn had secured the money : that after all was the crown of

all possessions. So thought little Mostyn, ha-ha ! He had wanted to keep these crisp, delicious pieces of paper all to himself, had he ? Well, well, boys would be boys, and it showed the right spirit. It could not be allowed, of course, but it was not a matter for punishment : it had been easy to twist his wrist just sufficiently to make him disclose his hiding-place. That had not hurt him : his father would by no means really hurt Mostyn. A good lad, a clever lad, he would go far. And his father would find him something as a present—if he could.

Lovely, lovely £5 notes ! What bliss to contemplate them ! And no risk. She would never dare to accuse him, and, even if she did, she had no proof. It was not as if he were ever likely to betray himself by putting them into circulation. No, no, they were far too precious. When he was tired or sad, he would take them out and gaze upon them, secretly, yes, ever so secretly. They would be his for the rest of his life. It was in a very, very pleasant mood that Humphrey Lasker, doctor of medicine, eventually went upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Cecilia discovered her loss, her first impulse was to return immediately to 42 Laburnum Villas and tax her late pupil or his parents with the theft. Her burning indignation triumphed even over her vast dismay as she took three hasty strides to the door, but, as she opened it, she paused. A cold blast of air came up the draughty passage and set her shivering afresh, and the second's ensuing reflection convinced her of all that had been so beautifully obvious to Dr. Lasker. Unless she could actually lay hands on the stolen notes whilst in his or Mostyn's possession, she had no proof at all, and she knew that, once seized, they would never be spent by the miser. Dismay triumphed in its turn over indignation: in utter dejection she turned back, closed the door, and, throwing off her clothes, sought relief vainly in sleep.

She passed a restless, wretched night, in great distress of mind and great discomfort of body: the morning found her with a burning, choking sense, flushed and fevered. She did attempt to get up but turned giddy at the first few steps and surrendered: she must be about again seeking

work with the least delay possible, but she realized that there was only one way of avoiding serious illness and that that was by staying in bed. That way she took, grim and desolate. There for forty-eight hours she fought against both illness and despair with all the enfeebled resolution left to her: on the third day, white and weak but no longer fevered, she struggled up to resume her solitary facing of a hostile, or indifferent, world. Round her neck, slung on a piece of silk long enough to enable them to be wholly concealed in her dress, she had the two rings, her wedding-ring and her engagement-ring which, she was thankful to remember, she had so worn since the day of Mrs. Lasker's prying: she had no other wealth of any kind, and her one treasury note was barely enough to satisfy her landlady for three nights' shelter. She knew she could raise a few pounds on her engagement-ring at a pawn-shop and a few shillings, perhaps, on her wedding-ring; but she had vowed to herself that these tokens of her lost glory should be buried with her, and that vow no extremity should cause her to break. She set out, thinking dully that the day of their burial was being brought appreciably nearer by her disasters than by her age alone there had been reason to anticipate.

She made her way, feeling at each step her weakness, to Miss Chivers's agency: it was her intention to insist on seeing Miss Chivers herself, even if she were kept waiting till the agency closed, and

when in the presence of that thin-lipped, prim, but not unkindly little woman to conceal nothing, tell the whole story, and trust to her sympathies to do something, no matter what, for her. She rang the bell and the door was opened, as usual, by the unfriendly girl-assistant, Miss Knight by name: even before Cecilia could frame her request, she said with casual interest, "Hullo, you back? From the Laskers, aren't you?"

Cecilia, exhausted with her walk, nodded.

"Stuck it out longer than most," commented Miss Knight, running her eye curiously over Cecilia. "That Lasker's a caution. My, but you don't half look hungry!"

Indeed, as a result of her weeks of underfeeding and her attack, Cecilia was not merely white but wan: her little tip-tilted nose had a sharpness now unnatural to it, and her cheeks were drawn; and, lovely as she was, it was with the loveliness of delicacy and not of health. Miss Knight seemed to have forgotten the cause of her original animosity: she was herself plump, ruddy, and in possession of a reasonably good job. She regarded Cecilia with sympathy and spoke with kindness, "Come to see Miss Chivers?"

Cecilia again nodded and then added a pathetic, "Please."

"Well, she isn't here—down with the 'flu."

"Not here?" Cecilia's last hope went: she clutched at the lintel to steady herself.

"Isn't going to be here this week, she says, and

I don't know that I can do much for you. You want a job bad, I suppose?"

"Indeed I do—anything!" breathed Cecilia faintly.

"Well, let me think: come in a minute, any way."

Most gratefully Cecilia accepted, and the two girls passed in together, unaware that the concluding words of their conversation had been overheard by a big man who had been about to pass, but, arrested by the sight of Cecilia's profile as she lifted her face eagerly to the girl on the step above her, had stopped abruptly and pretended, whilst continuing to watch her, to be gazing in at an adjoining shop-window.

As soon as the door was shut upon her, he advanced to it and read with appreciation the brass plate announcing the agency. For a moment he hesitated, apparently deliberating, then he rang the bell. Miss Knight, who had just begun to turn over the pages of Miss Chivers's ledger with Cecilia anxiously at her elbow, gave an exclamation of annoyance and, closing the book with petulance, said, "Always the way, isn't it? Never leave you alone a minute if you are alone, see what I mean. Now, if she'd been here, there wouldn't have been a caller all day. Hop in there while I see who it is." She motioned Cecilia into the waiting-room, gave her hair a pat or two in front of the glass, and went to answer the bell.

Cecilia sank down into a chair, her heart beating

with a tremulousness that seemed to her reason almost absurd : this girl, friendly as she was, could obviously do nothing for her. How tired the walk from her lodgings to the agency had made her ! She would not have believed an illness of three days' duration could have had such a devastating effect. She was sunk in tingling weariness when, ten minutes later, the door was opened rather stealthily and Miss Knight came in. She had a curiously dubious expression upon her round face and looked at Cecilia steadily a moment before she spoke.

"I don't know what to say about it and that's a fact," she began.

"What's happened ?" asked Cecilia patiently.

"Well, there's a client in and asking after you—at least not exactly after you, if you know what I mean, but after some one like you. Wants a young person, nice and presentable, to look after things for his wife. Light work and pleasant, that's what he says. Offers good wages, too."

"Oh, could you—may I?—" Cecilia half-rose in her eagerness and could not complete her request.

"Well, yes, you can, if you like. But it don't sound right to me."

"What d'you mean ?"

"It isn't for me to say exactly. But I don't like the look of him, and I wouldn't go myself."

"Beggars can't be choosers," said Cecilia bravely.

"He can't possibly be worse than Dr. Lasker."

"No ; well, it isn't my affair. Want to go in and see him ?"

"Of course."

With the same dubious expression Miss Knight ushered Cecilia into Miss Chivers's room. "This is the young lady," she said primly : "she's been on our books and has just finished a job. She's free if she suits, and I can take the booking fee for Miss Chivers."

In the room, prowling up and down as though pressed for time, Cecilia saw a big man, well dressed though in a florid style, with a straggly, reddish beard that did not wholly conceal the loose fullness of his lips. He seemed about fifty-five, was corpulent as well as tall, and his face as he smiled wrinkled easily : his eyes were small and closer together than was handsome and there was puffiness beneath them. He broke into an expansive smile at Cecilia's entrance, but looked at her only in snatches that she found both furtive and disagreeable.

"She does suit," he said promptly, "very well indeed : in fact I needn't trouble to look further. Brooke, is that your name, Cecilia Brooke ? Quite a pretty name, upon my word."

He implied geniality at once, but the implication somehow lacked aim ; at any rate it went coldly past Cecilia who found him so little to her liking that all her eagerness evaporated. Nevertheless, what she had said to Miss Knight was true, she was not in a position to choose. She replied

reservedly to the few questions asked and had it confirmed from her prospective employer's lips that she was engaged as companion to his wife, who was an invalid, "wants some one young and jolly about, you know," he said; "and I'm not a doleful one myself. We'll make a happy little party, eh?"

Ignoring his half-wink, Cecilia asked as to terms and details. Unperturbed, he replied blandly and the terms were, as Miss Knight had said, good.

"No niggardliness about me," he affirmed jovially, glancing this way and that. "Geoffrey Benton's my name: but every one calls me Tod-dles." He went into a jocose, slightly embarrassed laugh, and then at once became business-like; in a few crisp sentences it was arranged that Cecilia should settle into her new post by tea-time that day.

"Unless you'll have a bit of lunch with me now?" he suggested hopefully. Cecilia declined, which caused him first to laugh and then to ask her again more ingratiatingly. On her second refusal, worded as politely as possible but firmly uttered, he shot her a sudden, spiteful look and then, jauntily taking up his hat, muttered about 'a pleasure deferred,' and took his departure.

"I don't like it," said Miss Knight doubtfully. "He's rotten, if you ask me."

"That," replied Cecilia, "is, I'm afraid, only too obvious. But I can't help it, I must have work, I'm on the rocks: and I can take care of myself."

"I don't like it," repeated Miss Knight; "I've

heard of him before. But, look here, ring me up if it isn't all right : you never know what fellows like that'll be up to. I'll have to be here till six at any rate."

"You're very, very kind," said Cecilia warmly. Materially, this plump, rosy-faced girl could be, she was sure, of no help to her in the difficulties of the solitary path she must tread ; mentally, the kindness of the thought braced her like wine. For weeks she had lived so entirely without any such thing that she had almost forgotten that it was possible for anybody ever to be genuinely kind.

Punctually at 4.30 p.m. Cecilia toiled up the stairs of Morpeth Mansions : she had vividly in memory her few minutes' lateness in first arrival at the Laskers' and was resolved not to offend in like manner again. She had her suit-case only with her : she had managed to persuade her landlady to keep her trunk for her a day or so. Why she arranged this she hardly knew : she told herself it was because she was penniless and could not start by borrowing her cab-fare ; in her heart she felt the pressure of another reason, but she would not admit even to herself that there were some situations which not all her courage could render possible. Resolutely she turned her mind away from defeat, and yet did not disdain wholly to ease withdrawal. Still encouraged by the remembrance of Miss Knight's kind thought and telling herself almost passionately that she was lucky in that she was not without employ, whatever the private

character of her employer, Cecilia dragged her suit-case laboriously through the streets and up the stairs of the block of flats named to her.

Hardly had she regained her breath and rung the bell of No. 11, two flights up, before the door was opened by the expectant Mr. Benton. He creased his face delightedly at sight of her, rose-flushed from her climb, and thought to himself that he must be looking remarkably jovial: across Cecilia, who had expected a maid, fell the strong sense that he was terribly like an overfed baboon.

"Ah, there you are!" he exclaimed heartily. "Come right in: you're just in nice time for tea."

He made no attempt to take her suit-case from her and, her enfeebled muscles being strained to aching point, she dropped it in the little hall and followed him with reluctance down the short passage. He preceded her into a room furnished for comfort rather than beauty; it had several deep leather armchairs and a big divan in front of a brightly blazing fire, beside which stood a small table with a tea-tray on it. A kettle sang cheerily on the hob and the impression made on Cecilia, after all her discomfort, would have been distinctly agreeable but for pictures that were unpleasantly suggestive and the absence not merely of a third person but also of a third tea-cup. This she noticed the instant she set foot in the room: it was a man's room and it whispered to her cynically from each of its four corners.

"Where's Mrs. Benton, please?" she said

uneasily. "I'd better make myself known to her at once."

"Plenty of time," he rejoined casually. Then, anticipating the quick protest that was rising to her lips, he added, "Matter of fact, she's not in at the moment: sit down and have some tea."

"I thought you said she was an invalid," rejoined Cecilia, continuing to stand and gazing at him firmly.

"So she is, a great invalid; but she has to have exercise—oh, what's it matter? Sit down and make yourself cosy."

At that instant and as he bent over the fire and seized the kettle, the telephone rang.

"Damn!" he muttered. "Always something. Let it ring." He began stolidly to fill the teapot.

The jangling of the telephone bell continued: it rasped Cecilia's already taut nerves; it did more, it seemed that it was to her that it was addressed. Without waiting on the idea, she stepped across and lifted down the receiver. "Hullo, yes, who is it?" she asked.

"Leave that alone," growled Benton surlily.

"I'm beginning my duties," she flashed at him, as over the line came a voice she knew inquiring, "Is that you, Miss Brooke? Good. This is Daisy, Daisy Knight. Look here, I've had you on my mind; I've been asking about that fellow you're with. He hasn't got a wife; he's a thoroughly bad lot. You hop it quick. Make any excuse, and come down here to me. Come quick:

I've a reason. I don't like to say too much, but—Any way, hop it from that fellow. See?"

"Yes," answered Cecilia quietly: she was amazed at her own coolness. Her mind raced, and her plan was formed in a flash. "All right, I'll tell him." She dropped the receiver. "Rather hard to hear," she said, turning calmly to Benton; "something about a missing parcel. Good heavens!" she stopped, drawing herself up suddenly.

"What's up?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why, I've never brought my trunk in off the cab! I've left it! What with a new engagement——" As she spoke she made a dash for the door, gained it whilst Benton, kettle in hand, stared at her uncomprehendingly, and, still talking about the need for stopping the cab and recovering her trunk at once, dashed along the passage. By the front door of the flat lay her suit-case: she caught it by the handle without checking, wrenched open the door and was gone. Benton, still with the kettle, had followed her slowly as far as the door of the room, saying testily, "What the hell's the use of making such a fuss? It'll be all right. Come back and have some tea."

Tea was his one idea, at least his immediate idea, and his mind, though excessively persistent, worked slowly. It was not until he saw Cecilia grab at her suit-case that it seriously dawned on him that she was not just running down momentarily to the front of the Mansions, but was clearing

out altogether, and even then he had to think before he converted enlightenment into action. When that process was complete, he gave a roar of angry disappointment and precipitated himself in pursuit. Cecilia had a start of at least ten yards and all the advantages of youth and terror. On the other hand she was handicapped by her suit-case, of which it never crossed her mind to let go, and she was only just up from bed. But her terror carried her headlong until she reached the street. The moment she felt upon her face the freshness of the cold evening air, the wildness of her terror left her: she ran on as rapidly as possible but no longer blindly. A few people were in the street, and, if that foul beast wanted a scene, he could have it: a scream would bring the curious at once to her rescue.

Benton was apparently somewhat of the same opinion: he caught her up only a little way along the street near a lamp-post, but attempted no more than cajolery. "What's the bright idea?" he asked, puffing dangerously. "What a game you're having with me! Steady on or I'll not be able to keep up!"

Cecilia stopped. For one moment she fought down rising hysteria and with a supreme effort of will compelled herself to an unnatural calm. She looked him square in the face beneath the lamp-post and then said as curtly as her labouring of breath would allow, "If you follow me another step, I'll give you in charge."

"But, I say——" he stuttered, taken aback.

"Are you going," she cut in, "or shall I call to those men over there?"

Benton shot another shifty glance at her and at the approaching couple she had indicated, saw that she was as far removed from bluffing as anyone could be, and, muttering under his breath, half-cursing, half-apologizing, drew off slowly back to the flats and left her.

The crisis past, reaction set in. Cecilia held her ground desperately till the strangers had gone by and then all strength seemed to drain away from her heart; her fingers released their fierce grip of the handle of her suit-case, and she sank down beside it on the stone step of an unlighted door, utterly exhausted, yielding at last to the forces of weakness and despair. Great sobs shook her frame and tears ran unheeded down her cheeks. What beasts men were! One after one another they lay in wait to knock one down, to take from any girl who was so credulous as to trust them, love, money, honour. Cecilia in her weakness and confusion could not discriminate: all the past was a blackness of pain to her and into the future she could not peer. She had won free from the immediate foulness that had threatened her, but she was beaten; she knew that she had no more fight left in her and must bear unquestioningly whatever further blows Fate might choose to rain upon her now defenceless head.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW long Cecilia sat on the door-step by her suit-case, exhausted and desolate, she never afterwards knew; nor could she give a clear account of what befell her next. She had a vague recollection of being spoken to curiously by some woman who was passing by and of repelling her sympathy with irrational vexation: she had also a remembrance, equally shadowy, but more menacing, of being spoken to by a man who stopped and questioned her, of rising up in renewed affright and of fleeing in distressed haste from him. But that either of these occurrences had actually happened she could not truthfully have testified. Under-feeding, illness, the laborious dragging of her suit-case to Morpeth Mansions, the upheaval of the horrid experience there, and the physical spurt of flight—all these in quick sequence had so struck at her that she was left half-hysterical, wholly confused. She was certain of nothing until, what seemed to her long ages after, she was made aware of a voice which was not merely friendly but also in some degree familiar.

“My word, I thought you were never coming! I was just wondering what I ought to do about it.”

Cecilia came, as it were, back to the surface to find herself fixedly ringing Miss Chivers's bell with the door open and Miss Knight standing above her on the step. The street was ill-lit and it was not for a moment that Miss Knight realized that Cecilia was hardly aware of her, but was still pressing the bell in a dazed and pitiable condition. Then she broke out in long, streaming sentences of indignation and sympathy, most incongruously blended, and, jumping down as she talked, put her arm round Cecilia and helped her in.

"Gosh, you wait till I get my fingers on him!" she exclaimed ferociously. "You just wait! I'll make him wish—my, but you do look bad. Had a bit of a tussle with him, I can see. Those elderly old fatties are always the worst. In here and I'll get you a nice cup of tea! Cheer up: there's better times coming. I believe I can fix you. Pull yourself together."

Miss Knight hustled Cecilia into the waiting-room with such energetic kindness that Cecilia almost stumbled. She sank down in mistiness and gratitude into a chair as the door through into Miss Chivers's little sanctum opened.

"Is this the young lady at last?" came an incisive, but not unfriendly, voice: then it suddenly rose into sharp surprise, "Why, whatever's happened?"

"She's had a bit of an upset, your ladyship," explained Miss Knight. "She'll be all right in a minute: I'm getting her a cup of tea."

Cecilia opened her eyes to find herself in the presence of a strange lady who was gazing at her with a keen sympathy and an interested curiosity that she made no attempt to disguise. The lady was tall, silvery-haired, and exceedingly good-looking: her rather aquiline features were saved from all asperity both by their evident refinement and also by the kindly expression that was stamped as habitual upon them; and, as she stood leaning a little upon a stout, rubber-tipped stick, it was obvious that, lame and old as she might be, she still retained in abundance her activity of mind.

"All right in a minute?" she repeated with energy. "Why, she looks a perfect wreck!"

Cecilia struggled with infinite difficulty into a more upright position: the surroundings of the room had brought her back with an agonizing rush to the realities of her situation. She was at Miss Chivers's agency: by a most happy chance a lady, a real lady, one who spoke the same language and had the same mental outlook as herself, a kind lady too, was there: she must be wanting a servant, a something. What had Miss Knight said? She believed she could fix her, get her a place did that mean? Was it possible? At least Cecilia could not afford to let so precious an opportunity pass: she must at once fling aside her weakness or for ever drown. Summoning all her resources, she sprang to her feet saying with a passion of appeal,

"Oh, but I'm strong, much stronger than I

look! And I'm willing, and not incompetent! Only give me a trial!"

Sudden vertigo overwhelmed her: the quick springing up betrayed her. The room dissolved before her eyes into a blur of lights and spots; a sound of roaring waters was loud within her ears. She swayed and collapsed back, dizzy and helpless, into the chair from which she had sprung.

"Poor child, poor child!" murmured the voice, seemingly far away. "She's had a bad time." The voice took on a sharper note of authority as its possessor turned to Miss Knight. "Get some water or that cup of tea you were talking about! Quickly, please!" Miss Knight ran and the old lady bent over Cecilia, lying back white and spent: the voice, speaking low to its possessor, became gentle and soothing in her half-uncomprehending ears, "Plucky little thing, goes with her head up till she drops, I know the type. And pretty, awfully pretty, that's been the trouble, I expect. I don't wonder——"

Cecilia opened her eyes and the voice stopped. The next instant Miss Knight hurried in and began her ministrations with voluble sympathy. Cecilia suffered her uncomplainingly: some message seemed to have passed mutely between her young, frightened eyes and the old, calm eyes of the lady; Cecilia struggled against fate no more but patiently awaited whatever was to develop. The visitor listened appreciatively and without interruption whilst Miss Knight expatiated at length and with

ardency against what she called "those two beauties," Dr. Humphrey Lasker and Mr. Geoffrey Benton—"a disgrace to the town, the pair of them; I'd run them out on a rail like they do in America, so I've heard—and she goes straight from the one to the other. Is it any wonder she hasn't a kick left in her? I don't think!"

After a few minutes of Miss Knight's discourse little that she knew or imagined about either man or Cecilia's past experiences was unknown to her hearer, and matter enough for a dozen actions for slander had been put into circulation. Before Miss Knight had completed a sufficient portion of her general survey to be at the stage of repetition Cecilia was sitting up with a faint tinge of colour in her cheeks, gratefully sipping her tea.

The old lady, still leaning on her stick, turned to Miss Knight and began in a low voice to question her: as through water Cecilia could hear Miss Knight's replies, in a friendship as warm as it was young trying to gloze over her lack of references.

"And now, if you're feeling well enough," said the old lady, at length, returning slowly to Cecilia, "let's talk business. It's getting late and we've a long way to go."

"I'm quite well," responded Cecilia eagerly: "I'm sorry I was so silly, but I had a nasty little experience."

"So I gather. And you're free?"

"As the birds of the air—and as unsupported."

Cecilia uttered the last three words in a low voice, to herself more than to her questioner. What impelled her to this unnecessary addition she could not say: she only knew that she felt singularly drawn to this lady, at once so kindly and so keen-eyed, and was beyond the wish to hide from her her destitution.

"That's fortunate—for me, I mean. I'm motor-ing through and I—" the lady hesitated a moment and surveyed Cecilia again with a glance that seemed to read her right through. "I get a mes-sage," she went on, apparently content with the result of her renewed scrutiny, "to say that if I go straight home, as I intended, I shall not have a single moment's peace. That's cheering, isn't it?"

"Very," answered Cecilia, wondering what was coming.

"So her ladyship comes to Miss Chivers, of course," put in Miss Knight importantly, "and I thought of you. And so——"

"Let me tell my own story, please," intervened the visitor without irritation but with an authority to which Miss Knight instantly deferred. "Wray-bourne's my name, though that won't convey any-thing to you, and in a sentimental moment I've rashly taken upon myself to be responsible for two small children whilst their parents are in India. And that's where you come in, if you will."

Wraybourne? Had she or had she not ever heard the name? Cecilia could not remember;

so many names had sounded briefly in her ears during the vanished days of her promotion into the world of distinction. At any rate, even if she had ever heard it, the speaker was right, it conveyed nothing to her now. Two small children? Strive as she would to listen, Cecilia could hardly understand for her weakness.

"Their nurse has left them suddenly," went on Lady Wraybourne. "I never liked her and I was put in complete control, so what was I to do? Pretend or let her go? Any way she's gone, and I find myself, at my age, landed with two mischievous little monkeys that'll exhaust me utterly in ten minutes. MacDougall, my kind old maid, is looking after them for the moment, but they're altogether too much for her. They've taken her measure most amusingly, and besides I want her myself."

"Are you, are you asking me to come and take charge of them?" faltered Cecilia.

"Have I been asking anything else? Of course I am: you're just what I've been hoping to find."

"But you don't know anything about me?"

"I hear you've no references, but then I've also heard the reason. References from some employers are worse than useless. And, if it comes to that, I've none. You'll have to take me on trust too. Are you satisfied?"

"Quite." It was the most inadequate expression possible of Cecilia's feelings, but all speech was difficult to her.

"So am I. Miss Knight's told me all she knows, and it's enough. I don't go by paper, I go by my own eyesight. You've taught in a school?"

"Yes."

"Very well, and you're free to come right away?"

"This very minute," gasped Cecilia, hardly able to believe that her hearing was not deceiving her.

"Excellent, that's what I meant. Now as to terms——" Lady Wraybourne knew her own mind and, whatever her degree of competence with small children, she was at least completely mistress of her own affairs. She named a generous scale of payment and, in less time than it took Cecilia fully to grasp what had happened to her, she had had her supported on the stalwart arm of Miss Knight and placed in the large Daimler that was waiting incongruously in the little street. It had been unnoticed by Cecilia on her dazed arrival, and the staid, elderly chauffeur was far too little impressed by the provincial town in which he found himself to have been interested in any of its happenings; Cecilia did not begin to exist for him until she emerged from Miss Chivers's agency in his mistress's wake. At the time Cecilia was conscious of nothing but the need for retaining Lady Wraybourne's approval, and in her utter weariness she was incapable of making any movement towards that if it were not hers of its own volition: it was only later that she was glad to learn that the chauffeur—Richard Fraser, married

to a nice little wife, with a jolly child of eleven—had not the superiority that must have been his had he heeded her distraught ringing.

Cecilia had left to her no mind and hardly any consciousness. She existed in what she felt to be a dream; but she could neither plan nor speculate. It was Lady Wraybourne who commented upon her suit-case and, after further inquiry, directed Fraser to go round by the lodgings where Cecilia had left her trunk. That was retrieved and, as the back of the car was already fully loaded with Lady Wraybourne's luggage, it was squeezed in in front beside Fraser with the suit-case precariously perched on top of it. In so far as Cecilia had strength with which to reason at all, she wondered how Fraser, who seemed so particularly conventional, liked a strange, poor girl's impedimenta jostling his arm and spoiling the appearance of his large and dignified car; and she wondered still more at the thoughtful kindness which had made Lady Wraybourne remember a young nursery-governess's possible possessions, and, late as it had grown, be so graciously willing to go out of her way to gather them. It was all arranged too with such a consolatory absence of fuss. And when they were really on their journey, heading out from the little town, grown so incredibly sordid and hateful, with what simplicity of phrase her kind old employer put her at her ease.


"Push that cushion behind you and tuck the rug in, my dear," were the quiet words. "You're

worn out. There's plenty of time for a bit of rest before we stop for the night. I must get you strong again quickly if you're going to cope successfully with the children."

Cecilia thanked her in a few words which, however sincere, expressed far less than she felt, made herself as comfortable as her aching body permitted, and settled down into unreality. The great car ran swiftly forwards, its lights seemed to draw the road towards themselves smoothly and remorselessly out of the heavy hangings of the outer darkness: in between, black and almost grim, was the squat silhouette of Fraser's head which seemed to be pushing, pushing against the long tunnel of brightness in front. On and on went the car; rhythmic became the sounds; further and further drifted away all the tangible things of earth. Cecilia was an atom, just conscious of inscrutable fate bearing her on. She had no resistance, no will: she was folded in warmth, she was touched by kindness. She closed her eyes not consciously but insensibly. She neither knew whither she was being borne nor did she care: in that hour she had but one dim, dull regret, that she was to be called upon once again to be with children. She had loved children all her life, of whatever kind or age—until she had gone to 42 Laburnum Villas and been brought closely into contact with Mostyn Theodosius Emmanuel Lasker. Childhood and Mostyn—how remote from one another! And yet Mostyn was a child and as such had poisoned

her thoughts of children. And before him had been that insensitive little ruddy-haired boy in the train, around whose remembrance lay the roots of pain.

Cecilia's drooping eyelids closed upon the wish that she could be anything, however humble, to this kind, imperious, old lady beside her, but freed from all children for ever. Yet she could not choose: she was being borne away from the town where she had suffered so acutely; she was very weak and very lucky. She must not begin this new phase of her emptied life with one tinge of regret. Consciousness even of this drifted away from her and, still borne along in the sliding car, she slept.



CHAPTER XVIII

IT was not until the following morning that the sense of unreality that had descended on her like a mist began slowly to dissolve in Cecilia's mind before the sunshine of Lady Wraybourne's continued kindness. She had roused herself from sleep but not from unreality to find the car stopped at the door of an hotel; she had been sensible as in sleep of getting out of the car, hearing her employer engage rooms, tidying for dinner, eating it, even talking during it, sitting a while in a lounge over coffee—doing in fact just those things which she might once have expected to do naturally and simply in her own right, doing them now as an automaton under impulsion—and then of being sent off early to bed. During all these incidents she had moved still in the mist. Every now and again a ray of truth broke momentarily through as some kindly inflection of Lady Wraybourne's quick, incisive tones or some friendly glance from her keen, old eyes struck upon her deadly weariness and whispered to her that the most evil of her days was done; but for the most part she could not believe that she was not experiencing a vivid triumph of the imagination, and

shudders of apprehension that she would awake and find herself back at the Laskers or imprisoned in Geoffrey Benton's flat surged irrepressibly over her.

After a night's sleep fact began very slowly and wonderfully to dominate fancy. No degree of memory could dispel the knowledge that, on awaking, she found herself in a comfortable bed in a clean and airy room, and to that knowledge was surely added a recollection of the process that had brought her to it. Only one doubt remained, the feeling almost amounting to conviction that in the excess of relief at her deliverance she must altogether have overestimated the consideration and the humanity of the lady who had delivered her. For many minutes after she had awoken, Cecilia tried soberly to reconstruct her impression of Lady Wraybourne that she might not begin her new employment by a fresh disillusion. How had the old lady looked when she found on arrival at the hotel that the new governess instead of helping her lameness and her luggage had stood by uselessly, still struggling with the sleep that had engulfed her? What had Cecilia said during dinner that was companionable or even tolerable? How had she answered her employer in the interval before she was despatched to bed, no doubt in disgrace? Cecilia tried so hard to remember, but the whole of the evening's proceedings were shrouded. All she could be certain of was that she had failed dismally just when every instinct

both of gratitude and of prudence should have spurred her to success.

At this point her reflections were interrupted by a knock on the door. One of the hotel maids entered with a message from Lady Wraybourne. Cecilia heard it suspiciously : to have her breakfast in bed, if she liked, at any rate not to trouble herself about anything, but to be ready to go on again in the car at 10 o'clock—it sounded kind enough, but Cecilia's fears interpreted it to run, ' You're quite useless : do as you please as you did last night. I can't get rid of you here, but I will as soon as ever I can.' Nervously she told the maid she would get up, and proceeded to do so at once. When dressed, she was at a loss : she wanted to go in to Lady Wraybourne, whose room, she discovered, was next door to hers, but was too diffident. Diffidence was a quality of new growth in her ; she was desperately anxious to please and in her anxiety fearful of giving offence. Once she laid her knuckles on Lady Wraybourne's door ready to knock, but could not gain the courage to make the sound. She went downstairs finally, in a rage with herself for her inability to decide whether the old lady would be pleased or displeased at her abstention. If only Lady Wraybourne had had a maid with her ; it was almost singular that she had not since she was aged and infirm, obviously well off, and had been travelling by herself ; but it was all in keeping with the impression of self-sufficient gallantry that she had

somehow given Cecilia as her normal outlook upon life.

After breakfast Cecilia put in her things, fastened up her suit-case and waited about irresolutely until a quarter to ten. Then she could endure inaction no longer. She went boldly into the corridor and knocked upon the adjoining door.

"Yes, yes. Who's there?" came from within the voice which already seemed marvellously familiar to Cecilia.

"It's me, Miss Brooke," she answered. "Can't I do anything for you?"

"Nothing, nothing, thank you," came cheerily from behind the door. "I'm nearly ready. How are you? Rested?"

"Ever so much better. Are you sure I can't help?"

"Quite, thanks. I like doing for myself."

There was no way in which Cecilia could show at once her competence and her gratitude but by having her suit-case brought down to the hall—dimly she remembered being asked overnight if she would want her trunk and declining it—and by waiting in readiness for Lady Wraybourne to descend and depart. At two minutes to ten the Daimler drew up at the front door and Cecilia went out to give Fraser her suit-case and to exchange a friendly word with him, in order to efface any impression of superiority she might unwittingly have given. She found him respectful and communicative: he hoped to get right through to

Darlingby by tea-time, "if we start prompt," he added, "and her ladyship's never the one to be wasting time."

Fraser broke off and moved quickly forward to take Lady Wraybourne's suit-case and dressing-case from the porter and bestow both in their several places in and on the car. Cecilia, turning, saw their owner looking at her keenly through the glass of the hotel door: she had not been asked into the bedroom, she had been kept, courteously but decisively, outside; she grew terribly afraid as she felt the keenness of the scrutiny, and when Lady Wraybourne came through the door stood shyly and could find no words.

"H'm, you don't look quite so done," was Lady Wraybourne's comment, keen but not unkindly: "it'll take you a few days to pull up. And you've been ill as well?"

"Oh, but nothing much," eagerly disclaimed Cecilia. "Just a touch of 'flu, I think. I'll be quite up to my duties, I really will."

"My dear, I didn't mean that: I'm not a slave-driver. Well, Fraser," turning to the chauffeur to avoid the appearance of being conscious of the quick flush that the considerate words brought leapingly into Cecilia's pale cheeks, a tiny act that sent a glow of real affection suddenly through Cecilia's heart, "shall we get home to-night without too long a run?"

"We ought to be back by dark, m'lady, easy," he assured her.

"In that case I must send a telegram. They're not expecting us so soon. I won't be a minute and then we'll be off."

She stumped gallantly back into the hotel, once again refusing Cecilia's proffered assistance.

"Where are we going to?" asked Cecilia.

"Darlingby, miss," answered Fraser: then, noticing to his slight surprise that the word which meant so much to him meant little or nothing to her, he enlarged, "Darlingby Hall, her ladyship's place in Yorkshire, miss—not like her to leave it so soon after Christmas for anything."

Yorkshire, thought Cecilia. Luckily Yorkshire was a big county: she had heard John Harland speak of it with affection as having harboured his boyhood many a holiday among its spacious dales. Why should that recur to her now? It was big enough, even if he were ever to revisit it, to afford her adequate hiding-ground. She must not let herself be haunted by such wispy ghosts. Lady Wraybourne returned from telegraphing, and in another moment they were off.

It was one of those mild and sunny days of January that seem to go leaping and laughing precociously, yet charmingly, towards the longer, warmer days. To Cecilia, reclining back in the big car luxuriously beside her new employer, it was a day of magic: she abandoned herself to the sensation, revelling in the quiet hues and unexpected lights, the sudden changes of scenery so characteristic of England, as they left one county

and entered another, the peace of the fields, the shadowy beauty of the woods, the busy life of the villages and smaller towns. After weeks of bloodless, monotonous work the mere rush of the clean air was a joyous recreation. And she was leaving, further and further away with every minute, the darkest battlefield of her life: soon, behind her both in place and in time, it would be nothing worse to her than a terrible memory.

She was full of consciousness, for all her appreciation of the changing scene, of her companion: since Lady Wraybourne's considerate words and action the edge of her apprehension had lost its sharpness, but she still felt that she was with some one who, however kind, nevertheless expected the best and was determined to have it. And could Cecilia give the best? She had all the will possible, but had she the qualifications needful for the new post? Nursery-governess to two children; it sounded neither arduous nor exacting, and yet children could be, Cecilia now knew, dreadfully undesirable. Lady Wraybourne had described them as mischievous and exhausting: those epithets had in themselves no ominous suggestion, but then Dr. Lasker had called Mostyn intelligent and to Mrs. Lasker he had been sensitive. Cecilia had been so belaboured by Fate that all her self-confidence was gone. What were these two children in whose small hands were to lie her destiny? She bestirred herself to ask.

"The children?" Lady Wraybourne came out

of the brown study into which she had allowed herself, lulled by the smooth motion of the speeding car, to fall. "Oh, the boy's a fearful monkey, the most oddly defiant little wretch I think I ever set eyes on; it seems sometimes as though he simply didn't care. I admit I don't know much about children nowadays, but I've not found out how to tackle him. I haven't seriously tried, I'm afraid. It's too exhausting for an old woman: I find myself insensibly falling back on the line of least resistance in order to keep my popularity. Very weak of me, I know."

Cecilia's heart missed a beat: it mattered to her so terribly that she should now make good. No matter how kindly Lady Wraybourne might be, continuance in her employ must naturally depend on adequacy, and this account of one of her future charges was dreadful. 'A boy who simply didn't care': how very ironic, how truly characteristic of that underhand fighter, Fate, to send her to be with the one kind of temperament with which she felt least sympathy and least able to deal.

"And the other?" she asked with diffidence.

"Felicity? Well, I understand her a bit better as she's a girl, but make her do what she doesn't want to do, I simply cannot!"

"Is she—is she one of the simply-don't-care kind too?"

"Not as the boy is. They're extraordinarily different, which is interesting, I suppose, to their parents."

"You don't sound very fond of them, Lady Wraybourne."

"I am in my own way, but children didn't bulk so large in my young days as they do to-day. I had to be respectful to my elders and do as I was told. These children haven't the least idea of doing as they're told, and they talk to me as though I were their contemporary."

"That can be very attractive—sometimes."

"Where they get it from I can't imagine," went on Lady Wraybourne musingly. "They've been very simply brought up. It's in the air, I suppose. And I'm too old. It'd be different, perhaps, if they were my grandchildren. I haven't any—now." Her voice quavered just a trifle on the final word, and Cecilia was quick to interpret and keep her glance turned towards the window.

"I suppose, if all the truth were known," Lady Wraybourne resumed after a pause, "I'm jealous, not consciously, you know, but deep down. My only son had a little boy, and they're both gone. Robin caught pneumonia and just snuffed out before I'd even learnt he was ill, and Tom was killed in the war."

She spoke with simplicity and directness and with no trace of self-pity, and once again Cecilia felt her heart go out suddenly to an old and gallant figure. Cecilia tried to find suitable words, but all that came to her were rejected as banal. She gave Lady Wraybourne one look which had the eloquence of real sympathy, and

the old lady smiled back at her, and said understandingly,

"Life, as you've found in spite of your youth, isn't exactly a playground. At least," she added with a reaction from feeling to humour, "in these democratic, post-war days it's a regular skirmish to exist at all and I know I shall end under a 'bus.'"

Silence fell upon them afresh as they sped along. Cecilia's thoughts, which for a while dwelt upon her employer, reverted in unconscious absorption to her employment: once more she found that she was asking herself persistently the same question, how would she get on with these two children, apparently so self-willed and undisciplined, to take responsibility for whom was the one reason why she had been lifted from the abyss of despair.

"How old are my future charges?" she asked finally.

"Felicity's nearly five and Daniel's about two and a half," responded Lady Wraybourne after reflection.

"Not more?" Cecilia was puzzled.

"No, that's just about what they are."

Cecilia said no more: she had, she felt, food for thought. The answer was decidedly unexpected: she had gathered the impression that the children were eight or nine at least. How and why had she gathered it? In part, from the comments Lady Wraybourne had so recently let fall; but not wholly. She racked her memory, that still confused and troublesome possession. It was not

until later in the day that her search was rewarded. What questions had Lady Wraybourne asked her when she was engaging her? One only, and that had misled her.

"You look very thoughtful," remarked Lady Wraybourne. They had run all the morning, stopped briefly for lunch and were now well on their way again.

"I was wondering why you'd asked me when you engaged me if I'd taught in a school."

"Why not? It sounds a sensible question."

"But the children are so little."

"Well, I want you to teach them what you can and I had to ask something, just to impress that young assistant. I'd made up my mind. I said I didn't go by references; I trust to my own judgment. I was asking you to trust yours, coming away at a moment's notice with a complete stranger."

"Still——"

"My dear," remarked Lady Wraybourne quite affectionately, "I wanted some one who'd be company for me as well, and if I don't know a lady when I see one after all these years, then I'm better dead."

Cecilia felt a quiet glow of gratification greater than she had dared believe again possible to her. If only she could retain her post! That anxiety sat heavy upon her as the sun began to droop in the west and the car entered upon the wide and rugged country that marked almost the final stage

of their journey. It was growing dark at last as they swung off the main road, came again to woods and fields, went less swiftly and less smoothly along side roads and lanes and then turned in at last through the gates of Darlingby Hall.

In the gloom and in her fear, Cecilia gained no impression of it: her whole thought was now concentrated on the meeting with her two responsibilities.

"Four-thirty-five," remarked Lady Wraybourne as they drew up. "Fraser's done well. I told them to expect us by tea-time: the children'll be on the watch most probably."

Ah, another minute, and this ordeal, so strangely poignant by reason of its very gentleness of approach, would be over.

The door of the Hall was opened: light streamed out: a dignified butler descended the steps. Cecilia sprang down and, turning her back on the Hall, helped Lady Wraybourne descend: in all such small ways as were possible, she tried not only to delay but to efface herself. Yet the moment she most dreaded caught her unaware: she entered the big hall and then she saw the children.

They stood together at the top of the short, wide flight of stairs. The little girl, apple-cheeked, brown-haired, brown-eyed, rather tall for her age, robust, with a round, merry face and the most ridiculous button of a nose, was slightly in advance of her brother and was seen first: she was dressed in a delicate, dainty frock with her fat little arms

bare, and wound about her was a comic mixture of trailing remnants of silk and ribbons, an old bit of network, a strip of lace, a little imitation bunch of flowers and a tinsel crown, and she stood watching the stranger with an intensity of dignified seriousness.

"Oh, who are you?" cried Cecilia, running half-way up the stairs towards her.

"I'm the fairy princess," gravely answered the child, "and you're my new Nanny."

"Shishiti," announced the small boy. He was in white jersey and tiny knickers, too clean to have been put on for more than a few minutes, a large, sturdy fellow for two and a half, with hair like a ripened cornfield and wide-apart, steady, light-blue eyes. He clutched a torn and bedraggled book of trains firmly in a hand already grubby and stared solemnly up at her without a trace of shyness.

"What?" exclaimed Cecilia, utterly baffled by the strange word.

"That's my name. He's trying to say Felicity, but he's only a little boy," explained the princess. "He's a very naughty little boy," she added confidently, "aren't you, Danny?"

"Danny naughty 'ickle boy," corroborated her brother heartily.

"You're Felicity and you're Danny, is that it?" asked Cecilia.

"Dannihue Wentibare," instantly remarked the small boy.

Again Cecilia was beaten. Lady Wraybourne,

coming slowly up behind her, interpreted. "Daniel Hugh Wrenstead Baird," she said. "Quite simple when you're used to it."

"I'm Felicity Anna Gerring Baird," said the princess with proud elocution. "I'm a big girl, aren't I, Grannibel?"

"Oh, Lady Wraybourne!" exclaimed Cecilia with almost an ecstatic rebound of heart. "They're simply delicious, both of them!"

"How you do jump to conclusions!" replied Lady Wraybourne, smiling. "I believe you're very impulsive."

"I thought I'd ceased being that," murmured Cecilia. But Lady Wraybourne was now busy stooping with difficulty to kiss the upturned, expectant faces of her continually shifting wards.

CHAPTER XIX

“DANNY!”

A gurgle of indifference, quite beyond the powers of print to reproduce, was the only response that could be distinguished by the amused listener.

“Danny, shall we do everything we shouldn’t!” The eagerness of an ambition that would take all mischief for its province thrilled joyously in Felicity’s suggestive tones.

Cecilia could remain concealed no longer: she betrayed herself by giving way irresistibly to a peal of quiet laughter, and, being so betrayed, stepped with gaiety into the nursery.

“What are you laughing at, ‘Cilia?” instantly inquired the small girl, energetically pushing one of her hapless, much injured dolls into a miniature cot, already scandalously overcrowded. It was apparent that she was extremely busy with her unruly children and that her comprehensive inquiry of her little brother had merely been by the way, a suggestion thrown out casually from an excess of imagination. Now she looked up at her laughing governess with a certain air of comical self-consciousness which caused her round and rosy face to dimple very humorously; her eyes

met Cecilia's frankly with the confidence of a child that has never been frightened or even rebuffed.

"At you," answered Cecilia: "you get bigger and badder every day."

Felicity received this tribute to her importance by breaking out into a sudden high and hearty laugh as at a superlative piece of wit: it was an accomplishment she had just acquired and she was proportionately proud of it. It was in no sense musical, and yet it was so completely devoid of care, so entirely impossible except for the very young, that it was decidedly infectious. Cecilia at any rate did not for a moment attempt to withstand it. But it was never possible, when both children were present, to concentrate long upon either: both were not merely strong individualists, but blessed in abundance with that happy egotism which is certain that the rest of the world was created to revolve in docility round it. Danny almost immediately claimed Cecilia's attention: he was extremely busy striking a piece of metal he had found harshly against the wall in a corner of the nursery.

"Danny," she cried, "what are you doing?"

"I'm getting the paint off the wall," he announced with pleasurable pride.

"You young monkey, you mustn't!"

"You old monkey!" was his prompt retort: then as an afterthought, "Why mustn't I?"

"Danny's a very naughty little boy," stated his sister in a matter-of-fact voice, "isn't he, 'Cilia?"

"Well," explained Cecilia, trying to make herself feel authoritative, "he's too little to understand."

"I had 'cambolled aigg for geffus'," observed Danny with cheerfully complete irrelevance.

"So'd I," instantly asserted Felicity, "so there!" She stuck her pert little nose into the air in scorn at such a claim to isolated importance: scrambled egg for breakfast indeed!

"Danny, what have you got hold of?" inquired Cecilia, her eyes drawn to the instrument with which he had been assaulting the paint. "Why, that's the spanner I've been looking for everywhere for the nut on my sewing machine!"

"It's my 'ickle gick," declared Danny stubbornly.

Cecilia, by now sufficiently conversant with his language, informed him that it was on the contrary 'her little stick' and that he must give it up. "Don't keep banging it on the wall like that," she concluded, grabbing him dexterously by the heels as he crawled away rapidly under the table.

This did not at all suit the spirit of a youthful buccaneer: drawn out strugglingly, he repelled the assault with all energy, crying out, "Don't 'oo don't me!"

A few seconds later, having lost his weapon of offence to superior strength, he did his war dance, a very creditable representation of a Russian stamping measure. Cecilia had met it in him before, and the sight of a tiny, sturdy figure stamping round and round as though in uncontrollable rage always awoke her sense of the ridiculous: she at

once stamped round too to the tune of 'ever so crossy, crossy, crossy'. Danny tried to continue to stamp his wrath, but the effort was beyond him; in a few seconds he had yielded to laughter and his stamping changed to an energetic fun-dance, with the origin completely forgotten.

The memory recurred to her later when Danny was sleeping soundly, a cherub lapped in peace, and Felicity was by way of resting, with one foot over her head and the other idly scratching the wall at an elevation that was distinctly inelegant and at an angle impossible to an adult without excessive pain, whilst she kept up a sort of quietly chanted monologue all about her dolls and their adventures with the flowers on the wall-paper. Cecilia sat in the sunny day-nursery doing some of the ever-necessary mendings, and her thoughts wreathed themselves round the single sentence, 'Behold, I saw a new heaven and a new earth.'

She had been a month at Darlingby now—a very tranquil, a very healing time. She had gone nowhere, she had seen nobody, she had done nothing except keep a lame old lady company and look after two small children. Yet she had found her days free of all monotony. She had regained her wasted strength and, more, she had restored to health her lacerated mind. Almost it seemed to her as though she had died and been born again: the days before her meeting with John Harland now seemed to her in many ways closer and more real than those which had succeeded to her wedding.

Her short engagement flamed like a rose, scenting the air, and then was a darkness and despair that, recent as they were, seemed now impossible. Before the strange beauty of the birth to her of love she had been a teacher, not unhappy in the least but without experience of the greater joys of life, a quiet and contented spirit moving along lowland paths, unmindful of the mountain splendours. Since the sudden desolation of her heart and her rescue from the evils that had immediately engulfed her, she had become once again much as she had been, a teacher of the young, not attempting to tread the heights, content if she could avoid the sloughs, a humble, moderately useful person to whom nothing wonderful could happen and from whom all that was worst was stayed.

Not for a day, and hardly for an hour, did Cecilia forget the visions that had dazzled her. She had known love, therefore it was for ever a living part of her: it had been torn roughly from her, therefore she could never be joyous. Between the two extremes her lot must always lie. So was it, she reflected, for many others on this varied and contradictory earth: she must neither mourn nor grumble; she must gather to herself gladly every flower that came her way and never be envious of those whose heaven had known no overshadowing.

She was not joyous because she was not forgetful: she was not unhappy because she found both in Lady Wraybourne and the two children in-

creasing springs of comfort. Her first impressions of the former were deepened every day: to her her employer was unfailing in a kindness that was now warming into friendship, and to the world she presented a front in which humour blended with courage. Lady Wraybourne was never at a loss either for an occupation or a retort, and Cecilia, who had begun with gratitude and speedily passed to affection, found that continual, close association brought her daily nearer to devotion. Since her father died, she had known no adult to whom she could give dispassionate love: for all the forces of disillusion she was too young, too idealistic not to respond eagerly to Lady Wraybourne. She gave her no confidences; she had none which were hers to give, and Dead Sea fruit was in any case too bitter ever to be shared: but between old lady and young girl a very simple and beautiful relation was thrusting out its roots in the quietude of Darlingby. And as for the children, Cecilia had taken them straight into her empty heart that weary evening of her arrival, and there they had nestled and squabbled and chattered ever since. 'A new heaven and a new earth.' New in all ways: the old, like a snake's skin, lifeless behind her, the new placid, uneventful before her, outstretched upon the plain as far as her imagination could reach.

How beautiful it was to live uneventfully! Once, in the heyday of her inexperience, she had been eager for happenings, she had had a zest for adven-

ture. That phase of her life was over. Adventure was a dragon to be feared, happenings were evils to be dreaded. She was content to be at Darlingby, even in the dead days of January: she did not want to go outside the estate or to meet strangers. All she wanted was peace and the homely company of one old enough to be her grandmother and of two young enough to be her children: with the few of her own generation who occasionally called or came over to a meal she was not at ease: she avoided them altogether, if possible, and she escaped to her nurseries as soon as she could on the occasions when Lady Wraybourne invited her specially. This desire for solitude, or at all events for quietness, one day called forth Lady Wraybourne's comment.

"I know it's dull here at this time of year," she remarked; "but you seem actually to enjoy that."

"I do," answered Cecilia.

"All I can say is you oughtn't to: it's unnatural, and I'm a believer in Nature—up to a point. At first you were worn out, but you're not now."

Cecilia, to defend herself, had to fall back on the argument that there was such a lot of noise and racket in the post-war world that it showed sense in her to appreciate its opposite.

"Sense!" retorted Lady Wraybourne with spirit. "Whoever looks for sense in a person of your age? I shall have to do something about it or one day you'll wake up suddenly to the fact that you're horribly bored here and will leave me."

"I'm little likely to do that," replied Cecilia earnestly.

Lady Wraybourne gave her one of her keen and kindly glances and let the subject drop: but Cecilia did not forget. It recurred to her often and always with a thankfulness that her maimed life should have been allowed to creep into such gentle places.

On the afternoon of the day when she sat for the quiet hour before lunch thinking of all these things, she first went further afield than Lady Wraybourne's boundaries. Lady Wraybourne was visiting friends some miles away, and in consequence the children did not go downstairs after their lunch but were ready to go out earlier than usual. It was a warm and beautiful afternoon, with the spirit of youth whispering very attractively through the February air. So subtle was the suggestion that it tempted Cecilia unawares, and instead of being as perfectly content as heretofore to take the children the same round of field-path, farm, and lane as had usually satisfied both her and their uncritical direction, she said to them as she tipped the perambulator down the little step leading to the drive from her door of egress, "Well, where shall we go this afternoon?"

"I want to see the ga-gas," said Danny.

"No, 'Cilia, don't let's," pleaded Felicity, as though the ducks that were her daily delight were now repellent to her: "let's go——" she paused long enough to show that her objection was based

solely on the principle of contrariety and that, having voiced it, she was now thinking of a reason to support it—"oh, I do want to go to Ha-Hollyland!" she finished, with the accent of sincerity of an accomplished actress expressing the one long-concealed desire of her existence.

Cecilia was at no loss to understand. For one thing, she knew that Felicity had a curious trick of duplicating the beginnings of certain words—for example, she was passionately addicted to flower pictures and among these her favourite was one of what she invariably termed 'ca-carnations': and for another 'Ha-Hollyland' had often been on both the children's lips, a place where once ('when we were very little, Danny was only a baby' according to Felicity—this meant, Cecilia concluded, the previous autumn or summer) they had had a picnic. Felicity's description had been brief but dramatic, 'lots of cakes and bikkies, and Danny got so jammy': she remembered the way or at any rate asserted that she did, and as she had a remarkable memory for direction for so small a child and as, in any case, it was of no moment where they all went as long as they went somewhere different on this alluring afternoon, Cecilia laughingly fell in with the random suggestion, and they set off accordingly for 'Ha-Hollyland.'

On the way Cecilia in the intervals of endeavouring to satisfy Felicity's 'inordinate appetite for stories was able to spare a thought or two to wonder afresh at her own lack of enterprise. The

way—according to Felicity, who raced on ahead in all the importance of a guide—led by winding lane to ancient orchard and from that haunt of elf and fay on down a dell and into a wood where a grassy path led up a slope between the lightly slumbering trees. Except for the chatter of the children and the note of thrush and blackbird—both children and birds inexperienced songsters practising doubtfully—there was no sound in all the world: it was much more attractive than any walk Cecilia had yet been: how lazy-minded of her, she thought, never to have discovered it before.

In high fettle Felicity led the way: Cecilia tugged the light country perambulator up the grass path, feeling more glad to be alive than she had been able to feel since her tribulations began. At the top of the slope she looked down through the trees and cried suddenly aloud with pleasure.

“I don’t see the hollies, darling,” she called to Felicity who was now racing wildly down hill; “but I love your Hollyland!” Her eyes sparkled with a new delight as she gazed on the scene spread out in front of her.

“You can’t catch me!” sang Felicity.

“Can’t I?” answered Cecilia, abandoning as inopportune her desire to take in all the detail: Felicity was disappearing into the unknown, and she must follow her charge promptly. With Danny exhorting her in a stentorian voice and bumping wildly, she launched herself in laughing emulation of the little, speeding feet.

CHAPTER XX

IT did not take Cecilia, active and almost merry as she had become on this smiling February afternoon, long to overtake the flying figure of Felicity. Handicapped though she was by the perambulator containing the joggled and ecstatic Danny, she drew level with Felicity as they all neared the bottom of the wood. She then took the lead and ran on until her progress was stopped by a gate leading into a great, rolling meadow: over that she leaned, gasping and laughing, with a rose-flushed face and bright eyes, a girl from whose heart all pain had momentarily fled. Felicity joined her and instantly began to get into dangerous positions on the bars of the gate: Danny insisted upon being put upon his feet, which he also immediately used for the purpose of daring acrobatics. Cecilia was faced, if she continued to lean on the gate, gazing, with the imminence of two broken necks and several disjointed limbs. She unclasped Danny from the gate, much as a tripper dislodges a limpet, by plucking him suddenly before he had time to tighten his tiny fists, and set him over the bars on to the grass of the meadow: then she helped Felicity over, and finally, with a sudden return of

sedateness, unfastened the gate and went through herself, trailing the light perambulator after her.

"Whatever is that lovely place, Felicity?" she asked.

"That's Ha-Hollyland," announced Felicity obscurely, running forward again and throwing herself delightedly down on the soft, damp grass. Danny at once imitated her, both his fat little legs high in air. It was several seconds before Cecilia, by dint of threats of instant incarceration in the perambulator if they declined to behave themselves, could get them safely on to their feet again, and have leisure for the scene before her.

In front, across the rolling meadow, on the other side of a low, trim ha-ha stretched a garden, a realm of dignity and grace, enriched with terraces well-designed and alluring, with harmonizing statues at corners of the paths and in the centre a big marble pool with a delicate sea-nymph blowing her horn as she urged on her curly-maned steeds. No water was shooting up into the air, nor at that season was the whole scene a blaze of colour and a dream of scent; yet it required but little imagination on that soft and sunny afternoon to picture the garden tenanted and alive in June. And beyond the terraces and fountain, on the rising ground on the further side of the little valley ran first of all a wide smoothness of lawn starting on the one side from a grove of old and splendid oaks and ending on the other in the harmonies of a big wood, and behind that again, serene in contemplation of the

smoothness, stood a long, low, gabled house, mellow with the grayness of its age, of many rooms and magnificent proportions, a house as gentle as it was stately, that seemed to Cecilia's imaginative brain to look out across the quiet valley and say to her and to all venturers in that valley, but most of all to her who even in her merriest hour had special need of comfort—"Come to me and be at rest!"

"Oh, but I do like that!" she exclaimed, more to herself than to the roving children.

"That's where I'm going to live when I grow up, with all my dolls," declared Felicity. "Perhaps I'll ask you to come and have tea with me sometimes, if you're very good."

"Thank you," murmured Cecilia meekly.

"My high castle!" boasted Danny with cheerful mendacity.

"But who lives there now and what's its real name?" asked Cecilia, wandering on with them through the meadow, still gazing at the great house with deep appreciation: the nearer she came, the older, the more peaceful, and the more beautiful it seemed. She could make out now some of the lovely scroll-work of stone over the windows and also how shuttered and still the whole appearance was. She had stumbled on the Palace of the Sleeping Beauty—at least so it would have seemed but for the order and care evident in all that met her eyes. No over-grown briars, no wilderness of rampant weeds here: every path was smooth, its

edges cut, every bed was raked and clean, ready for the spring glory; in a corner blazed a wealth of crocuses, whilst nearer in the meadow at the side near the wood a great drift of snowdrops, perfect in the beauty of their delicate prime, stretched like a soft patch of late-lying frost, and beyond this again wild daffodils in thousands were thrusting up the gray-green spears of their forerunning leaves. Money as well as taste had gone to the making and preservation of the beauty before her: it lived and graciously, but it was fast asleep.

"Dunno," responded Felicity indifferently. "It's Ha-Hollyland, of course."

"That's what you call it, you mean."

"That's what everybody calls it."

"Oh, well, I'm no wiser."

"But you're much beautifuller."

Cecilia laughed and abandoned the quest for knowledge.

"We mustn't go much further," she remarked at length when they had wandered happily right across the meadow: "we're probably trespassing as it is."

"What's trespassing?" inquired Felicity.

"Going where we oughtn't to."

"But Grannibel often used to bring us here when we were little."

"And what are you now, pray?" asked Cecilia, laughing. She made no further protest, however, when Felicity darted down the ditch of the ha-ha and wriggled dexterously up the other side and

over into the garden. She wanted, now that she had come so far, to see as much of the lovely place and house as she reasonably could, and it was probable, even certain, that 'Grannibel'—the children's name for Lady Wraybourne as an abbreviated Granny Isabel, to distinguish her from their real Granny—was well acquainted with the family who owned it and had visited there with them. In any case, trespassing with little children was a very pardonable offence. She left the perambulator behind and, lifting Danny, climbed up into the garden also.

"We mustn't be long, darlings," was the full extent of her caution, "or we'll never be back by tea-time."

The marble fountain appealed to all three of them: Cecilia sat on its low edge, grateful for the moment's rest, the children dropped pebbles joyously into the water. That, however, did not long content their younger animation: very shortly they were making such efforts to splash their fingers that it was obvious to Cecilia, grabbing first one and then the other resolutely by their nether garments, that it would be only a question of minutes, if they stayed by the fountain, before one or the other eluded her vigilance and pitched head foremost into the water. She harried her brood humorously up the terraces and on to the smoothness of lawn, where they could safely gambol to their hearts' content and she could look her fill at the splendid, silent house. So far she had seen no one; not even

a gardener had come to question them, and this absence of humanity gave to the whole scene the added charm of elfin unreality. It was not a house made with hands: it was the palace of a dream.

But the children, calling to one another like a pair of magpies, giving vent to a great hubbub of gay, nonsensical nothings, were bound to attract attention, if not call forth rebuke. Cecilia, feeling very conspicuous but also very irresponsible, was about to gather them and depart when an old man, wheeling a barrow, came slowly round the corner of the trees towards the house. Felicity, whose memory both for faces and for places was remarkable, dropped her chatter with Danny at once and raced towards him excitedly as to a long-lost friend. Cecilia, following on, had just time to admire the picture as the old man, wrinkling his face into a smile, desisted from his task and stopped to greet her with pleasure.

"Why, it's little Miss Felicity," he said. "It's long since I saw ye."

"Shishiti," corroborated Danny, panting in rear.

"And Master Daniel, to be sure." The old man then looked at Cecilia inquiringly and touched his hat with a, "Good afternoon, miss."

"I see you know this pair of rascals," said Cecilia. "I was afraid we'd get into trouble, wandering in like this."

"Oh, no, miss, that's all right. Anyone from Darlingby's always welcome. And there's no one at home."

"The family all away? It looks shut up, but beautifully tidy."

"'Tis kept so now," answered the old man with simple pride. "We did think as there'd be company and all, this Christmas as was, but no, it warn't to be."

"It's a lovely place," repeated Cecilia, half-turning to get a fresh impression of the house from another angle. "I wonder it's ever left unoccupied."

"It's been more often than not, too, miss, these last many years. But then that's the way of things."

"What's it called? The children's name for it is the funny one of Ha-Hollyland."

He laughed, looking down upon them tolerantly, as they rummaged busily among the leaves and rubbish in his barrow, unmindful of their elders' uninteresting conversation.

"And that's as near as their little tongues can manage, I dare swear," he said. "But you're from Darlingby, aren't ye?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, who's not heard tell of it at Darlingby?"

"I haven't been there long and have been little about."

"I see. A stranger, are ye? But strangers and all know of Hartley Harland."

"What! What's that you said?" Cecilia, resting casually against one of the handles of the

barrow, was stricken suddenly into an extremity of attention.

"Hartley Harland: 'tis sure ye have heard tell of it. 'Tis one of the old places, and the finest of them all in Yorkshire to my thinking. Man and boy, though, I've been about here nigh on sixty-seven year and ye do get a liking for the paths ye know."

"Hartley Harland!" Cecilia breathed out the name like a long-lingering memory of a home dearly loved: her eyes were turned upon the deep, mellow beauty of the old, great house with a wistfulness that dissolved it into mist; a burning pain seized upon her vision, and suddenly she could see no more.

"Who lives here?" she asked in a low voice.

"Why, 'tis Sir John's, to be sure. Always a John Harland for the house, though it's little they bide here, more's the pity."

She had not needed to ask: she did not know what had prompted the question. Why, when she knew, should she give herself the added pain of hearing the name repeated? Her name, if she had chosen to acknowledge it: her house, if she had chosen to enter it. The name that one solemn, lovely hour had made hers, the house to which once he had hoped to bring her. 'We did think as there'd be company and all, but it warn't to be'—she understood the old man's saying now as he would never, never understand it. Hartley Harland—the great place John had mentioned to her


so mysteriously, the old home he would not describe in advance lest his words should disfigure it in reality. As a stranger, led by little children, she stood this February day before the heritage she had discarded—and all its quiet beauty was swiftly turned to raging torment.

Regret the impulse that had driven her headlong from the train? The 'might have been', breathing through the gathering chill of the late afternoon, called to her questioningly from every part of the tranquillity. In the question wistfulness vanished from her, torn away as swiftly as it had arisen. She regretted nothing, so she told herself fiercely, nothing at least that she had done or could of her own motion have altered. She had fled from John Harland, her husband, because her love was pierced with a poisoned arrow, and she had been in love with love, and could not be content with it stricken and ashamed. At whatever cost, she had met the challenge, she had kept her ideals high. And now she was swept with a poignancy of inverted gladness: certain it was that the lovelier the external beauty of the home that would have been hers, the higher internally those ideals had need to be. To have lived anywhere with a husband careless of the heights of marriage would have been to her a degradation: to have tried such life at Hartley Harland would have been purgatory indeed.

The old, swift, irrational anger against existence that she had imagined she had left behind her for ever in the dreary swamps of the Laskers and Mr.

Benton leapt within her like a flame before the wind. And with it came a fear. By the providence of mercy Hartley Harland stood silent, shuttered, a great, gray ghost, a shell without the little spark of life. 'There's no one at home'—so the old man had said, and 'it's little they bide here'. She had not committed the futility, or been faced with the cruelty, of wandering in upon the husband from whom she had fled: it need never be made known to him that she had come in secret, spying out the land. He was at the other end of the world, and she was as nothing to the old gardener.

How horrible it all was! The whole scene had undergone a grisly change: the silence mocked at her, the blind eyes of the great house grimaced at her, the trees looked coldly, scornfully down upon her, the chill of the February dusk came creeping against her. Calling to Felicity, snatching up Danny, she threw to the old man a hasty explanation of lateness and the need for an instant return, and fled down the terraces, across the garden, and into the field where she had left the perambulator as though her mind were possessed of evil and her spirit cold with fear.



CHAPTER XXI

IT was a long way from Hartley Harland to Darlingby, much longer than Cecilia had realized. In the freshness of the early afternoon, in the merry lightness that for once had so ironically gladdened her heart and eased her steps she had taken no special note either of the distance traversed or the time taken. If they were back a little later than usual, it would not matter. And so, led on in part by the happy, irresponsible children, in part by the dreaming beauty of the great, quiet house across the rolling meadow, she had little heeded the drawing in of the day, except as a charm of quiet hues added to the tranquillity. She had been stabbed suddenly, terribly awake, and in the pain of the wound she was glad that she had been so unmindful of the lateness of the hour. It removed from her all necessity for pretence : she could tear along breathlessly, both children clinging jollily to the sides of the perambulator, like sailors to the rigging of a ship at sea, over the ups and downs of the meadow, and not be deemed by either child or even by herself to be unnatural. If she were to be back before she was overtaken by darkness, she must hurry at the top of her speed and not stop to think about it,

and never, even in the most troubled of her distresses, had she been more grateful for the need.

When she came again to the gate over which she had leaned gasping and laughing after the merry run down the wooded slope after Felicity, she was out of breath as then, but it seemed to her that laughter and she had been strangers for many a year. Ignoring the children's chatter, too sharply pricked by her mind's pain to rest, she tugged the perambulator, light in itself but a severe weight with the two children in it, up the hill with dogged resolution. She reached the top almost reeling from want of breath and with drops of perspiration gathering thickly on her forehead in spite of the coldness of the dusk. Thence she sped downward gratefully. Ha-Hollyland, of haunted memory, lay behind, obscured by the rising of ground and the ghostlike silhouettes of the trees: in front stretched orchard and lane, leading back in silence to the familiar paths. Rapidly as she had come, she was late indeed. The world was being gathered into darkness as she emerged from the meadow, and the children were both awed and thrilled at the magnificence of the adventure: Danny was by no means certain that he altogether felt secure, but Felicity was in ecstasies, gazing at the first of the stars.

"Isn't it fun?" she cried. "Look, the fairies are lighting their baby candles for us!"

Danny, it was evident, had but a poor opinion of baby candles; they were feeble and far away, and the darkness was big and near. But in another

moment even his apprehension gave way also to appreciation. Rounding a corner, they came to an open space between the hedgerows flanking the lane; the ground beyond fell slightly, and at its edge hung a big, yellow disk.

"Moona!" cried Danny, and was content, struck into silent wonder.

How grateful Cecilia was for that moon! It diverted Felicity just as she had begun to be querulous that none of her many inquiries was receiving any answer. Cecilia, her mind in a whirl and her body throbbing with fatigue, had hardly spared a thought before for her remissness in keeping her charges out so late: now that arose to add to her distress, and to have talked to the children naturally was impossible. She reached the drive of Darlingby without misadventure and turned the perambulator up towards her side-door with a sudden and extraordinary sense of home-coming. Poor and humble dependant as she was, Darlingby Hall had become in a very unusual degree her home: not only had she no other of any description, but in it alone had she received the healing gift of kindness.

She had no time to dwell upon any of her thoughts. In front of her, standing on the drive and leaning as usual upon her stick, was the dark shape of a figure she recognized at once as that of Lady Wraybourne.

"Is that you, Cecilia?" Anxiously the keen voice came out of the gloom.

"Yes, Lady Wraybourne."

"And the children?"

"Oh, Grannibel," cried Felicity, never at a loss for speech, "I've seen lots and lots of stars! I love them, don't you?"

"Moona," remarked Danny, a man of tenacity in his ideas.

"Thank heavens! I was afraid something had happened. Where have you been?"

"I'm dreadfully sorry," began Cecilia. "It was further than I thought and we got looking and——"

"We've been all the way to Ha-Hollyland," announced Felicity.

"Oh, you've been there?"

"Yes, the children took me: I'd no idea at all what I should see." Cecilia made her disclaimer hastily, forgetful that it could have no particular meaning to Lady Wraybourne.

"What did you think of it, Cecilia?"

"Very wonderful." Had her life depended upon it, Cecilia could not have spoken with animation: she felt as though her blood drained out of her at the question. What could she think of it, she, who might have been its mistress? Her one hope was that Lady Wraybourne would notice nothing: she was suddenly grateful for the gloom; Lady Wraybourne, she knew, was one whose attention little escaped.

It was at once evident that the gloom was an insufficient screen. Lady Wraybourne instantly queried the lifelessness of the reply. "You don't

sound at all enthusiastic and that's uncommon. That's Hartley Harland you've been to."

"So I understand now: I didn't before."

"Well, it's one of the show places of England, and it deserves to be: but perhaps you didn't see it properly?"

"We—we were only there a short while—in the garden, you know," answered Cecilia nervously: "and even so are dreadfully late."

"We saw Don," explained Felicity.

"John!" cried Lady Wraybourne sharply. "You saw——"

"An old gardener," Cecilia cut in: this was pain beyond all anticipation, endurable only by the exercise of all her fortitude.

"Oh!"

"I said Don," repeated Felicity, "old Don: he gave me such a lovely bunch of flowers when we went there with you, Grannibel."

"I'd forgotten," murmured Lady Wraybourne. "I thought for a moment Felicity meant Sir John Harland, but he's away, so I believe: that's what surprised me."

Cecilia made no answer, felt as though she could make no answer.

"Well," went on Lady Wraybourne, "I'm glad you've seen it. I must take you over there properly when the weather's getting better."

"I must go in," said Cecilia hastily. "It's long past the children's tea-time. I do terribly apologize."

"'Graceful 'Cilia, aren't 'oo?" remarked Danny cheerfully.

"Graceful?" queried Lady Wraybourne, puzzled.

"He means 'disgraceful'," said Cecilia wearily. "And he's righter than he knows."

"My dear, you're tired and dispirited. There's no harm done. I was anxious, but I see it's all right. Not cold, are you, children?"

"I'm snugly," answered Felicity, squeezing herself down suitably under the rug, and pushing Danny's feet aside imperiously.

Cecilia waited for no more, but started to take them swiftly in. She had not gone further than a few yards when she was stopped momentarily by Lady Wraybourne's calling after her, "Don't bother to bring them down after tea, now it's so late. Just pop them into bed early and go early yourself. I shan't expect you this evening unless you want to come. I'm sure you're tired."

Cecilia thanked her warmly and went in. Since Lady Wraybourne had had no visitors staying and dining with her, the pleasant custom had been informally established that Cecilia was her companion at dinner whenever she wished to come downstairs, whilst a maid kept watch in case either of the children woke, but there was nothing fixed or tyrannical about it: if Cecilia was busy or tired, she she had only to let the butler know and her supper was sent upstairs to her instead. This evening she was especially glad of the informality that enabled

her to absent herself without its calling for comment or giving offence, and her heart went out once more in gratitude to the kind employer who had noticed her lack of spirits and by attributing it to ordinary weariness had so eased the way for her strong desire for solitude.

For an hour or more she was fully occupied with the children ; she gave them their tea, played with them, and put them both to bed with an automaton's precision : she could not respond to their chatter or give herself except externally to them at all. Full of her afternoon's adventure, not even the quick-eyed Felicity noticed any deficiency, and by seven o'clock both children were tucked up in bed murmuring themselves amusingly into sleep and their attendant, hardly conscious of the fatigue of her body for the fearful disturbance of her mind, was free to sit in the day-nursery in the external peace of solitary silence and give herself over to the torments of reflection.

Hartley Harland ! How cruelly ironic it was that she should be fated to live within a few miles of what should have been her home ! There was all England, all Yorkshire at any rate, else : but she must needs come to Darlingby, an afternoon's walk away. What was she to do ? She was in charge of two small children who as the days lengthened and the sun gained power would in the normal course of things be often over at Hartley Harland : even a year ago when they were very tiny they had become familiar visitors. And Lady Wraybourne had been

explicit: she would take her over 'properly'. What a word to use! What a trail of festering sore it left behind it, for all the innocence with which it had been said!

Nothing was more certain than that, if she remained, she would be faced frequently with the necessity for visiting her husband's great, old home. Did that matter? And could she help it, whether it mattered or not? She could not leave: it was beyond her strength to face again the rigours and the terrors of impoverished independence; she had been too near the pit ever to approach it voluntarily again. Nor, even apart from that inward shrinking of every part of her being, could she desert her post, this particular post at least, without a reason that she could make apparent to Lady Wraybourne. She could not find it in her heart, even if it cost her pain to stay near Hartley Harland, to see those old eyes that had never rested on her yet save in kindness grow first incredulous, then pained, and finally angered, as they would of a surety if she were to give in her resignation and assign no real reason. And, finally, she could not leave the children. Once, glancing at pictures with Felicity, she had inadvertently touched the hidden spring that revealed a small girl's memory of her absent mother, and Felicity, who ordinarily was the gayest of little mortals, had shown that deep down she missed her mother and remembered her lovingly. She had wept and begged Cecilia with tears never to leave her until her mummy came back from across the

sea, and Cecilia, all unwitting of Hartley Harland, had promised. It seemed a small thing, a promise given to a little child in ignorance of a very material factor ; but it loomed very large, there in the silent nursery, in Cecilia's mind. She envisaged telling Felicity that she could not keep her vow, and the picture daunted her.

Besides, need she be so full of fear ? Pain it was obvious she must endure, but that would be within her, a penance of her own making, of which no one else would ever know. And beyond this pain of living near the might have been, of being taken as a very humble guest to the stately house in which she might have been the mistress and of hearing spoken the name that might have been her pride and her possession, was there anything else to dread ? He, her husband, the Sir John Harland of Hartley Harland, was away ; he was, as she knew, not merely absent from his home, he was at the other end of the world. Much might happen before he returned : Lady Wraybourne presumably would remove to London in the summer ; the children's parents were due to return, so she believed, in a few months' time. When that happened, she would be set free. It was true that freedom to her could mean nothing of joy, on the contrary a miserable setting forth alone, but at least she would be befriended and passed on to honourable work. She could expect no more in this world.

She roused herself at this point with an angry shrug : she was approaching too close, she told

herself with irritation, to self-pity. She had made her bed : she must continue to lie on it. But why, why had Fate so unkindly thrust upon her this tragic proximity ? That surely was as unnecessary as it was unforeseen. What strange tricks Life delighted to play upon its luckless subjects !

Having decided that she had no choice but to remain on as she was as present, heeding as little as might be the stab that had been dealt her, Cecilia tried to turn her thoughts into a different channel by taking up a book ; but it was no use. She could not keep her attention on the page : her own adventures seemed to her more convincing and infinitely more momentous than those of anyone in her story. She laid it down and, leaning forward, elbows on her knees and her little chin cupped in her hands, she sat gazing into the caverns among the coals of her fire, thinking. She had lately been re-reading *Pride and Prejudice* and the thought of it recurred to her now ; her mind went with a bound, and she laughed shortly. Elizabeth Bennet at Pemberley, and some could be found to say that it was in consequence of the glories of that place that Elizabeth brought her mind to tolerate Mr. Darcy ! How little such critics could understand the inner workings of a girl's mind ! Girls there were, no doubt, and always had been, who married for money and social estate, but not Elizabeth Bennet, and not, so she murmured to herself with unhappy pride, not Cecilia Brooke. On the contrary, it was just because she had married for love alone that all that

had happened had left her life with the unescapable tang of bitter disillusion.

Thank heaven at least that no John Harland had suddenly emerged from the house or wood to complete the pain of her strange adventure, by his mere presence to crush his prying wife into the dust in a paroxysm of shame! Cecilia shuddered at the thought. The appearance of Darcy had brought a moment of mortification to Elizabeth Bennet, but Elizabeth was not married to him: she had not even been engaged to him, she was still invested with a freedom that had never been embittered. What would Jane Austen have said of a heroine who fled from her husband on the afternoon of her wedding day? Could such a thing be? Save for the fact that it had been, Cecilia would have answered, No.

There was no help in the novelists, not even in Jane Austen. There was no help in reality, not even in herself. It was become simply a case for thankfulness that the worst of ordeals had been spared her, and for endurance of the lesser that was laid upon her. Oppressed with all the difficulties with which Life was continually confronting her, but resolute still to overcome them, Cecilia went at last to bed.

CHAPTER XXII

FELICITY cast a severe glance at her young brother who was concentrating the whole of his attention upon the dribbling art of resting his upturned, emptied mug of milk over his face and licking with outstretched tongue the stranded grains of melted sugar that he had been allowed in it as a treat. "Danny," she remarked judicially, "is a naughty boy: when he grows up he'll be older'n than I am."

"No, he won't, darling," replied Cecilia, leaning over and catching the mug just as it was falling. "You began first and you'll always be ahead of him. When he's five, you'll be eight."

This was considered, adjudged satisfactory but incomplete. "And when he's eight, what'll I be?"

"Eleven."

"Oh!" Rapture at such dignity glowed in Felicity's eyes. She resumed the cross-examination with enthusiasm, and was taken up the ladder of age till she reached the dizzy elevation of twenty-three.

"And now hurry up and finish," exclaimed Cecilia. "You do take a time, and Grannibel specially asked that you should be down early this evening."

"Why?" inquired the chief inquisitor.

"Because she's visitors and they want to see you."

"May I wear my pink frock?"

"You can wear anything you like if you'll be quick. Danny's finished. Say your grace, Danny, if you want to, and then you can get down."

Danny did want to, but not in any casual fashion such as that suggested. He insisted upon doing the thing properly: none of your easy Erastianism for him. He sought the middle of the floor, knelt down, demanded silence, peering out twice from behind his pudgy little fists to see that the congregation was suitably attentive, and then at last voiced the fervent thanksgiving of his own composition,

"Dubbadau, dubbadee, dubbadah!"

Cecilia tried to retain the solemnity of look required, Felicity in considerable scorn exclaimed, "Danny's too little to put any 'stonishment into his grace," said her own with conscious propriety of elocution, and tea was ended.

It was three days after the visit to Hartley Harland, three days of slowly subsiding storm: Cecilia was still rocked by the cold gales that had swept down upon her, but, as life at Darlingby resumed its evenness, their strength seemed a little to lose their force and she was decided that when next she was taken to visit the grand, old, silent house either by Lady Wraybourne or by the children she would not again admit that it had, or could have, any personal message for her. She would go in the spirit of a

perfectly detached sightseer and allow beauty, wherever it was to be found, to exercise its natural art of healing.

She washed the far-flung traces of jelly from off the children's faces and fingers, changed them into their drawing-room clothes, and took them downstairs. It was characteristic, she thought, of Lady Wraybourne that, in the belief that Cecilia was feeling the monotony of nursery existence at Darlingby, she had specially invited several friends over in the last two days and had insisted on making Cecilia consider herself one of them. Cecilia was grateful but would much have preferred to be left in her insignificance. There were some, she knew, now having tea in the drawing-room, and visitors, she believed, expected to stay: it might be many days before she could resume the very welcome quietude of her first weeks at Darlingby. With a sigh, and restraining Danny from pitching headlong down the last of the stairs in his vain attempt to descend as skilfully as his longer-legged sister, she opened the drawing-room door.

Her ears were greeted by an animation of talk which died down as the children stood on the threshold with the shy dignity of clean clothes displayed to company, and Lady Wraybourne said, "Ah, here you are!"

They made a delicious group, posed in the doorway, Felicity in advance, and Cecilia holding Danny's hand behind. In her little gray-green dress, bending over to remove Danny's stubborn

finger from his mouth, she was invested with the charm of simplicity, youth, and grace.

Felicity was called a model of politeness by those who only saw her on set occasions ; she had a natural dignity, arising from a complete lack of self-consciousness that was highly attractive to seniors. She advanced now without prompting, and held out her hand smilingly to the nearest visitor, a Mrs. Stevenson who had been more than once at Darlingby since Cecilia's arrival. Danny on the other hand was contrary : he did not greatly approve of visitors ; they distracted attention from his favourite drawing-room occupation of jumping off a stool and were apt to talk very uninterestingly among themselves. He certainly saw no reason slavishly to imitate Felicity ; if she were going round shaking hands, he was for the independence of man. With some deftness he sidled to the tea-table, grabbed a lump of sugar, popped it into his mouth, and crunched it before he could be prevented.

Cecilia, rather put out for fear lest the visitors should attribute his greedy evasion of the social requirements to a deficiency of instruction on her part, clutched him, spun him round from the table and exclaimed severely,

“ Danny, you are naughty. Say ‘ How do you do ’ properly.”

She straightened up, faced the visitor to whom she had directed Danny, and looked straight into the eyes of Sir John Harland. They were eyes neither astonished nor amused : they rested upon

her with a quiet, critical regard ; they were the eyes of a gentleman looking for the first time upon the companion of one of his old friends ; they had in them not a trace of suggestion that he had ever in any capacity gazed upon her before.

The world spun round. The shock was so absolute that for the space of a second Cecilia was deprived of all consciousness. Mrs. Stevenson and her daughter, Marjorie, were fully engaged by Felicity : Lady Wraybourne was behind Cecilia and addressing herself to the impenitent and successful Danny who had wriggled instantly away from under Cecilia's arrested clutch. Cecilia was left standing seeing nothing distinct and yet staring, and it seemed to her impossible that Time should ever jerk forward again to end the encounter.

Across the reeling ocean of her turmoil floated like a steadying wind the quiet voice of Lady Wraybourne, " Cecilia, get Danny his bricks, there's a dear."

She gasped for relief and rushed to the big drawer in which toys for drawing-room use were kept. For a moment she burrowed in it blindly, unable to distinguish bricks from dolls, her senses like autumn leaves in a gale. Then, with a great effort, she cleared her eyes, seized the bricks, and straightened. Again she heard Lady Wraybourne, " I'm forgetting that you need to be introduced, John. This is Miss Brooke, who's kindly come to look after these pickles of Evelyn's and to keep me company. And I don't know which she does best."

Lady Wraybourne linked her arm a moment affectionately in Cecilia's as the latter stood motionless. John Harland gave the short smile of convention's greeting upon an introduction and looked away to Lady Wraybourne. Whilst he looked at her, Cecilia felt paralysed in limb and brain: now, released, thought streamed over her turbulently, incoherently as waters huddled in a precipitous ravine. In another second she must speak: how could she keep her voice from betraying her to every one?

"I'm sure they need looking after; they used to be just like Walter," she heard him say: ah, how the well-remembered tone vibrated on her consciousness! There was gravity even in the light sentences, to her ear at any rate: she wondered whether he were in reality as completely composed as he appeared. "How do you do?" he added conversationally, extending his hand.

Cecilia had had her eyes on the ground: now she raised them slightly and looked at her husband's hand. The remembrance was a very sharp pain; she wished to turn away and burst into tears. Instead, she, who even in this kindest of homes could not obey her impulses, forced herself to lift her own hand and with the tips of her fingers hastily brush his. The touch, fleeting as ever she could make it, was fearful to her: she felt it for minutes afterwards running burning up her arm.

Rescue came from an unexpected source. The preoccupation of grown-ups is a child's oppor-

tunity : so at least thought Danny. Even though the scrabbling sound betrayed him, he yet had time to transfer a second lump of sugar from the basin to his mouth. Cecilia whirled round and caught him up and hid her face against him, far too grateful for the diversion to scold the roguish thief. But the rescue, complete as it was, was momentary only. Felicity's attention, attracted to the bulge in Danny's cheek, passed on skimmingly to the tea-table and she was about also to disgrace Cecilia when she was anticipated by John Harland, who said to her ingratiatingly,

"Hullo, Felicity, aren't you going to remember me?"

She eyed him swiftly, then replied with gravity, "I do 'member you. You gave us strawberries and cream."

"'Tawbellies," announced Danny, struggling so hard to be set down that Cecilia had to part with her welcome shield.

"We didn't have any strawberries when we went to Ha-Hollyland the other day," said Felicity in a tone of dignified reproof.

"Oh, you've been there lately, have you?" he asked instantly, with what seemed to Cecilia's ear a sharpness of attention that was anguish to her.

"'Cilia took us," explained Felicity with brevity.

"No, no!" cried Cecilia, unable to let that pass in silence. "You took me."

"You took us in the pram," repeated Felicity

stubbornly. "But I showed you the way," she added with pride.

"Tawbellies," repeated Danny, afraid that he might be missing something.

"Poor little Danny," said his sister witheringly : "he's only a little boy and he doesn't understand." Then reflectively she added, "I don't either ; but I don't say so."

Cecilia prayed that John Harland did understand : that he should think she had gone to Hartley Harland of her own accord was intolerable, he could not be left to think it. At whatever cost she must disabuse his mind of any such impression. She had no immediate opportunity : Mrs. Stevenson spoke to her and then Marjorie, and with a whirling brain and pulses racing she had to compel herself to polite attention.

She longed to be left alone, to be able to withdraw into a corner and there, unobserved herself, to observe her husband carefully. Though she had stood and stared, she had seen nothing : all that had been in front of her had been a blur, withholding every scrap of knowledge from her except just these three divisions of the same fearful experience, that she was face to face with the man she had married and left, that he did not appear to recognize her, and that he had apparently come to the house alone. Her longing could not be gratified : the Stevensons, mother and daughter, had come gradually to be on as friendly terms with her as she could allow any one now, except Lady Wraybourne, to become ; they

wanted to talk to her ; and the children, one or both, kept on claiming her. She had to prevent Felicity from bothering the visitors and try to find her some occupation that would keep her quietly amused—an impossible task since Felicity was suited neither by age nor temperament to play a subordinate part in any assembly : she had to take Danny's hands to jump him down off the stool or see him in grave danger of pitching into the fireplace. She had as little opportunity as strength of will for a steady study of John Harland. She could only from time to time, as her position favoured, shoot a quick, secret glance in his direction, and after she had twice in so doing met a steady, even a quizzical, return of eye from him, her composure was in such peril of complete dissolution that she kept her attention rigidly chained to the children.

But her thoughts refused a similar obedience : they poured into the sea of her discomfort in a turbulent cascade. She did not wish to think about him, not whilst she was in his presence : to her dismay and almost anger she found she could think of no one else. He looked well, she thought, very well : too well, she was near to adding. He had been playing, sauntering in the sun, whilst she had been working, starving through an English winter. But she must be just : that was not his fault, at least not his decision : it was hers, and she had long passed, she told herself, beyond regret. He looked grave : as one of her glances found him bending towards Lady Wraybourne in quiet conversation,

she fancied that she could tell herself that there was an addition of gravity in him. What did it matter? He was nothing to her, nothing, that was to think, that he had not been before this terrible meeting: his proximity made him no different, gave him no rights. He was a stranger to her: more, he had instantly made it evident that that was what he wished, and intended, to be. He would have disowned her had she claimed him. Perhaps he would have been right, since she had done the disclaiming with such vehement totality. But one thing he must not be allowed to believe. It could not be permitted that he should leave the house, or she the room, until she had cleared away the intolerable idea that she had gone consciously, pryingly, to Hartley Harland. Unobtrusively but intently she watched her opportunity to speak a word with him alone. Deliberately, so it seemed to her, he denied to her that opportunity. For all the completeness of his lack of recognition, he betrayed himself, she felt, by the care with which he avoided being left one single moment quite alone.

Once she thought she had succeeded: Lady Wraybourne had turned to Mrs. Stevenson and Marjorie had dropped on her knees by Felicity who had been plaintively calling for several seconds for some one to admire the castle she had built up with Danny's bricks. Cecilia turned at once to the tall, silent man, and began, "Sir John——"

He darted one look at her of swift inquiry, then quickly broke off with an "Excuse me," and before

she could stay him had stooped to catch the still-jumping Danny. Over his shoulder he said quietly, "Sorry, Miss Brooke : he was falling. What was it you were going to say ? "

"Nothing," she answered, her quick blood up. A moment later she repented of her refusal : she could not choose, she must speak as and when she could. Without seeking a specially favourable moment, she went up to him and waiting only until he had ended a sentence to Marjorie Stevenson said with a quietness that surprised her, "I ought to explain one thing, Sir John."

He turned from Danny, he faced her : for one instant their glances crossed like duelling rapiers lightly laid on one another, then he said with a quietness that matched hers, "I thought it was one of the privileges of ladies, Miss Brooke, never to explain. The last perhaps in this unchivalrous age that they have."

It seemed to Cecilia's attention, hypercritical as she felt it herself to be, that he laid a stress, very slight, but to her very significant, upon the two monosyllables, 'Miss Brooke'. She refused, however, to allow her purpose to be deflected by this or by anything else. She answered him with a degree of coldness in her voice that no experience in that kindly home had previously called forth, "Perhaps, but all the same I don't care to take advantage of that privilege."

"Oh, but surely ? " he cut in before she could continue.

"No," she persisted. "I'm only the children's governess, though Lady Wraybourne treats me as a friend."

"What's that?" queried Lady Wraybourne, turning from the Mrs. Stevenson at the sound of her name.

"Miss Brooke is unduly sensitive as to her position," explained John with grave, even heavy, courtesy.

Just to the degree that it was apparent that he did not intend to let her explain anything, without his knowing what it was that she wished to explain, to that, and a little further, Cecilia's obstinacy rose. She did not reflect that his obstruction possibly arose from the very fact of his ignorance of her wish, his uncertainty as to the thing that she might think it essential there and then to explain: she only saw in his attitude an unworthy opposition. He was determined to put her in the wrong, was he? Well, not for him or for any one, even Lady Wraybourne, would she stay there. It was insufferably unjust: so like a man! He had held every advantage throughout the whole miserable interview: he had seen her first, he was an old friend of the house, a favoured, wealthy neighbour; she had been taken by surprise, she was a penniless dependant. No matter: she would not be denied speech.

"That's not it at all," she said hastily. "With Lady Wraybourne that would be impossible. What I want to say, what I must say——"

"Felicity wouldn't be so positive," he interrupted

with a little laugh stretching out a hand to Felicity, which, to Cecilia's great and secret approbation, the child, busy with her bricks, completely ignored. Cecilia decided instantly that that was the cue for her also: she uttered the explanation to which she felt compelled in a rush,

"I didn't know where the children were taking me!"

He gazed at her blankly: it was then instantly obvious to Cecilia that he had not in the least expected her sentence. Almost she could have laughed: had he thought that she was about to announce their marriage or explain her sudden exit from the train? Could he think that? Were men such simple creatures after all?

Lady Wraybourne filled the momentary silence. "My dear," she said, "you're not worrying about that, are you? We all wander into Hartley Harland whenever we like."

"I wouldn't have presumed," answered Cecilia. She felt for the first time since her eyes had met her husband's that she was rehabilitating herself, if not in his thought, at least in her own.

"John doesn't mind, do you?" said Lady Wraybourne lightly.

"Any one is welcome," he replied drily. Once more to Cecilia's ear his accents carried more than the words he uttered; she thought she detected an emphasis, ever so slight and yet directed against her, upon the words 'any one'.

"Certainly," he added, turning directly to her,

"there was no need of any explanation from Miss Brooke."

"I didn't even know that Hartley Harland was anywhere near here," she protested.

"Why should you?"

The three monosyllables, said so quietly with an air of the utmost courtesy, were to Cecilia three mocking little fiends: they made up a question quite unanswerable, and she turned away to hide the tears of mortification that gathered in her eyes. He knew, though she had not known. He knew, he must know, that, had she known, she would never, never have come.

"Any way," exclaimed Lady Wraybourne, "what does it matter?"

Ah, a question even more unanswerable, though John at once leapt in to answer, again with an air of courtesy that was indescribably exasperating to Cecilia, "It must of course make all the difference to me."

He was hateful: he was deliberately mocking her. Cecilia locked the barriers of her mind against him. Murmuring words of general apology to all the company and mentioning the time as though aghast, she caught up the agile Danny and bore him, before he had even time to argue, out of the room to bed.

For the millionth time in this deceitful world a little child was pressed into service as a barricade between two adult temperaments at war.

CHAPTER XXIII

DANNY was popped into his bath that evening and scrubbed with an energy that was disproportionate to the dirt he had managed to acquire in the course of his gambols in the drawing-room. He did not mind, on the contrary he entered with enthusiasm into what he considered the prevailing spirit of the hour. The more stubborn the determination with which Cecilia worked at his grimy little knees, the more he kicked them about and the more he dashed his hands into the water beside them. Most gratifying splashes resulted, and, though his usually playful satellite remained serious, still Danny was sufficient of an artist to work on delightedly: he was a craftsman who adored a mess for its own sake, and desire for admiration for his cleverness in creating one was on all occasions secondary. The sides of the bath streamed, a puddle or two spread on the floor, drops even glistened on Cecilia's hair: Danny went to bed at last, well content with himself and his world.

Felicity was not altogether so satisfied. When her turn for bath and bed came, an unsmiling Cecilia descended into the drawing-room, nor did

smiles return, though she drew a great breath of relief, at the discovery that Sir John Harland had taken his departure. Felicity had, as usual, a hundred things to say and, though she insisted on no constant stimulation of answers or even of comments, nevertheless she did require that her words should not fall unheeded on inattentive ears. Like all raconteurs, too, she looked for the reward of laughter; and on this evening not one of her sallies could do more than evoke a fleeting and perfunctory smile. This was disappointing, but not crushing: at any rate the failure did not lie in herself. Even the most perfect grown-ups were sometimes the just a teeny bit stupid. In bed, Felicity crooned a little song to herself all about a visit to Ha-Hollyland where she revelled in an abundance of daffodils and strawberries—in that magic half-hour before sleep they flourished abundantly together. And that big man, ‘Surjon’, had taken her on his knee after Danny had gone to bed and talked to her about primroses: there would be lots soon, he had said, out in his woods and she could come and pick as many as ever she pleased. On the whole Felicity had no discontents: she fell asleep, peacefully at one with Life.

Not so Cecilia: as soon as ever Felicity was safely tucked away in bed and she had the day-nursery to herself, secure from eyes which, however young, were terribly observant, she drew up the low chair to the fire and, leaning forward in her favourite attitude, gave herself grimly to reflection.

What had happened? She had been brought face to face with the husband from whom she had dramatically and finally parted, she had been in the same room with him, she had even touched him. For the last three days since her discovery that Hartley Harland lay not more than a walk away beyond the slopes of the nearest hill, she had taken into consideration the possibility that one day she might again be thrown across his path and had met it fairly: she had decided that the possibility was a thing unavoidable, that it might even be an act of justice to allow it, if it would, to be translated into fact. It was at least right that one day, by some means or other, by communication if not by speech, she should let him know that she was alive: if he were married to the woman in the train, she could at any rate assure him that she would never cause a complication; if he were not, he should know that she, his wife, was not dead. But all this had been taken by her into consideration only as a possibility one day: in her thought she had strongly stressed the futurity; it was not a present problem, it was a far-off possibility. And now that comfort had been rudely dashed aside: it was not future, it was actually upon her, a fact that she could not postpone.

How had it happened? Only a few weeks ago she had had direct evidence that he was at the other end of the world. She could not recall that either the old gardener or Lady Wraybourne had actually stated that he was abroad; but they had certainly

both of them confirmed her previous knowledge. Yet he was in Yorkshire, at Hartley Harland, casually visiting Darlingby Hall. It was bewildering: it was cruel; it was a stroke of Fate that had caught her quite unprepared. One thing was evident, she could not now stay on at Darlingby as though all her calculations had not been upset. That would be impossible as an endurance of torture, it would also be impracticable: now that her husband was near, the risk that her identity would be discovered was immensely increased. Risk had been there since she came to Darlingby, but she had not realized it until three days ago. Since the ancestral home of the Harlands lay but a mile or two away, at any moment she might have met some one who had been at her wedding; but she had not suspected the proximity and had been saved the agitations of uncertainty. Moreover, she had gone nowhere and visitors had been few. But now, with Sir John Harland in residence and in the lengthening days, there would be more social challenges to security and sooner or later it was almost certain that she would be unmasked. Oh, with what a bitter malignity did Life pursue her! She was no sooner, after horrid and hateful happenings, settled down into a home where she could regain strength and courage and recapture her own soul, surrounded by kindness and by children's love, than she was moved on. There was no help for it; the decree was inexorable.

She arose wearily, with her lips pressed together

and her brows drawn down in painful resolve, and began to tidy the nursery. She would not go downstairs again that evening, she determined : she was too shaken by the recent encounter to face the keen scrutiny of Lady Wraybourne across the dinner-table. She would blurt out her resignation of the post that had been made in every way so easy to her and she would not have control sufficient to disguise the reason. But give in her notice she must : she would disappoint and grieve Lady Wraybourne, she would break her promise to Felicity—neither could be avoided ; the decision had been taken ruthlessly out of her hands.

Cecilia had just decided to send the message that was customary on the evenings she remained upstairs when she was joined by Agnes, the little maid who understudied her and waited on the nurseries.

“ If you please, Miss Brooke,” she said at once, “ her ladyship asked me to say she specially hopes you’ll go down to dinner to-night, to help her out, she says.”

That was unfortunate : Cecilia could not, for a cause for which Lady Wraybourne was obviously and utterly without responsibility, change with suddenness into inconsiderate retirement. For a moment she thought of pleading headache, but pride prevented her. She assented therefore, arranged the evening’s duties with Agnes, changed into her simple black evening dress and went downstairs.

She miscalculated the time: she was several minutes too early. On any other evening that would have been quite immaterial: on this it led at once to the very topic she had intended to postpone. Lady Wraybourne was already down, waiting for her guests: she glanced up at Cecilia from her chair, and then, changing casual glance to definite scrutiny, said slowly, and with kindness, "You're looking tired, my dear. Feeling all right?"

Then was Cecilia's chance: later, alone at night, she thought to herself how easy it would have been to have taken advantage of the opening to confess fatigue and ask to be excused. At the moment, however, her mind worked differently: she thought to herself in a flash that she must at all costs avoid giving the impression that she was tired because of anything that had happened—or any person whom she had met—that afternoon. She answered therefore hastily, "Quite all right, thanks. I'm not tired: I'm——" she broke off with abruptness.

"Yes?" inquired Lady Wraybourne gently.

"Nothing, nothing."

"Something's upset you: won't you tell me?"

For an instant Cecilia was swept with the almost overwhelming temptation to fling herself down at the old lady's knees and pour out the whole of her miserable story. Lady Wraybourne had never been anything but most gracious, most understanding, and, oh, the relief it would be! The words came

with a fiery rush ; she felt as though she only just closed her teeth in time for the barrier to fall before them, for them to batter themselves angrily against it. But she did close teeth and lips, and tightly. How could she speak ? It was not her own individual story, it was her husband's as well. How could she give what alone could make her own actions intelligible, the disillusioning bitterness of the encounter in the train ? He was Lady Wraybourne's friend, a neighbour honoured and admired : could she, an unknown dependant, utter words to pull him from his pedestal ? And apart entirely from the personal equation of their inequalities, of all personages Cecilia loathed a scandal-monger : to her there was something meanly repulsive in such. To pass into the ranks of them now, for her own gratification, was inconceivable. With a desperate self-control she choked back the flood of truth.

"It's not that," she said, strong in mendacity but weak in utterance. "If it were to do with me, I'd tell you, of course I would : you've been a very generous friend to me, and I'm not ungrateful, truly I'm not, but I think I must—I must—what I mean is, Lady Wraybourne, I'm afraid I must ask you to let me go."

There, it was out, the last thing she had meant to say and phrased in the most inept form in which she could phrase it. Oh, why had she not stayed upstairs, or hastily excused herself a few minutes ago ? It was uttered, and could not be recalled.

How would Lady Wraybourne take it? Would she instantly connect it with its obvious cause? From that apprehension at least Cecilia was speedily relieved, and she realized, as she listened, what little likelihood there was of that: why indeed should any one, unless they recognized in her the bride of November, connect her in any way with Sir John Harland?

Lady Wraybourne looked up at her quietly and even sympathetically: she did not appear to be surprised or even, as Cecilia had dreaded, angrily disappointed.

"I see," she said quietly. "It's as I feared. You wouldn't admit it the other day when I taxed you with it, but it is so. It's too dreary for you here, and so you want to leave."

"I'm sorry," murmured Cecilia, feeling dreadfully guilty and ashamed.

"So am I," replied Lady Wraybourne with a quick return to briskness, "and the children'll be broken-hearted, but it can't be helped. 'I'd hoped you were reasonably content, but I know that's the last thing people ever are nowadays.'"

"Oh, Lady Wraybourne——" began Cecilia.

"Don't apologize. I quite understand. Now let me see: it's the children I'm thinking about; we must let them down gently, mustn't we? They've grown very fond of you, you know."

Cecilia did know and the knowledge filled her with the most painful embarrassment: she opened her lips to speak, but could find no words. She felt

a beast, and yet knew that it was her misfortune, not her fault.

"As a matter of fact," went on Lady Wraybourne with a thoughtful air, "it doesn't work out so badly. It's the first of March to-morrow, isn't it? A month's notice, and I'm entitled to that of course, takes us to April and I expect Walter and Evelyn back not later than Easter. You'll stay a few days over your month, if necessary, won't you, to hand the children over to their parents? That'll make it as easy as can be."

What could Cecilia reply? In her own reflections she had come to no detached, logical conclusion, she had not pursued her determination round the first corner: she had vaguely visualized herself as gone as soon as ever she had decided that she had no alternative but to go. How differently everything worked out in fact from its conception in thought! She could not now be utterly selfish and, thinking only of her own difficulties, create others for her kind employer and friend and for the children. She heard herself, before she had even turned her thought upon the position, murmuring that of course she would stay as long as was necessary.

"Good," responded Lady Wraybourne with a cheerful acceptance of the position that was inexpressibly depressing to Cecilia. "And what will you do when you leave?"

"I don't know."

"Nothing in view?"

"Nothing."

"Well, well, there's plenty of time yet. I'll do what I can to place you happily."

"Thank you."

Crestfallen, Cecilia struggled against the load of misery that weighed upon her. How little she mattered to any one on earth! She had expected surprise, disappointment, annoyance, even anger, and had steeled herself to endure such a reception: instead, she was the one disappointed, she felt herself dropping forward, as a wrestler who has strained to resist a pressure that yielded to the touch. Lady Wraybourne was indifferent to her going, provided only it was not so precipitate as to cause inconvenience, and the children? Children's memories were short: Cecilia knew that she would be soon forgotten, and that, if she were not to meet Felicity and Danny for a year, they would then at best stare at her in dubious recognition; with the return of their parents she would so readily be eclipsed. She turned away to hide the burning mortification that she felt.

"My dear," continued Lady Wraybourne with unexpected sympathy, "don't be depressed about it. One can't always have things just as one would like. I'm sure I've no feeling about it."

"That's what's so hateful!" burst out Cecilia.

"I don't mean I don't mind losing you," Lady Wraybourne began, but broke off as the door opened to admit the new arrivals at Darlingby, Mr. and Mrs. Standish, an elderly pair of Lady

Wraybourne's friends, Mr. Standish thin and dignified, with a white moustache and gold-rimmed spectacles, and his wife a small, dainty, little woman who moved with lightness and spoke with rapidity. Immediately in their wake came Lady Wraybourne's two other guests, Eleanor Marchant, a tall, dark-haired girl of considerable grace and distinction, still in her twenties, and Mrs. Corbillion, a stout, short, middle-aged woman, florid of face and with the odd look of one resolutely on the march : both were expensively dressed, but whilst Miss Marchant's clothes seemed a natural part of her, like the leaves surrounding a flower, Mrs. Corbillion's attracted attention as a separate emanation of the dressmaker's art, and this in spite of an exquisite smoke-gray Persian cat that she carried with careless ostentation under her arm.

Cecilia, glancing rapidly at each visitor, found one cause for relief : all were quite unknown to her and, as their conversation immediately showed, all were unfamiliar with Darlingby. By the time introductions had been exchanged, the drawing towards the fire, so pleasant on a chilly spring evening, concluded, and the first inquiries and explanations as to the respective journeys made and given, Cecilia was confident that she could put her apprehensions of discovery behind her for one further evening at least : she was certain none of her present company had any reason to think of her as any one but the humble girl she seemed, and, that weight removed, tried to be glad that she was

not to be allowed to pass an evening alone in melancholy and unprofitable thought. She would have time enough in her life for that.

Little as she had felt like enjoying a social evening when she had entered the drawing-room ten minutes before, and still less as she had been prepared for amusing or interesting conversation by the galling interview through which she had just passed, she pulled herself fiercely together and, turning to Miss Marchant, began talking to her with the determination to let the evil of the day be sufficient unto itself.

She had hardly exchanged more than a few sentences of ordinary civility when the butler opened the door, as she thought, to announce dinner: instead with an air of considerable dignity he announced 'Sir John Harland'.

CHAPTER XXIV

HER husband's name was as utterly unexpected to Cecilia as his appearance earlier that evening had been. She drew herself up erect, spots of colour appeared swiftly on each of her pale cheeks, and she glanced about hurriedly, seeking escape. Escape, however, there was none: the butler closed the door, the assembled party broke off their chatter, all turned to the new-comer—she was trapped.

Dimly through her distress she heard Lady Wraybourne saying, "Ah, John, it's nice of you to come back again at such short notice," and his light and friendly answer, "Is it likely I would stand on ceremony with you, and after such an interval?" And then she heard him being introduced to Mrs. Corbillion and Miss Marchant. The next moment her heart thumped horridly in her throat: what was it that was being said? She heard Mr. Standish,

"How are you, my dear fellow? Glad to see you looking so well."

And her husband's answer, "I am well, thanks, and you?"

"Much better. But where's your wife? Haven't you brought her?"

"No"—slowly and coolly as though measuring liquid he spoke—"I haven't actually done that."

Was he deliberately tantalizing her, dribbling out half-knowledge? Had he a wife, besides her unacknowledged self? Once again he had come alone: he was aiming, Cecilia was sure, past his unconscious listeners, to the rigid and terribly conscious girl in the background. Now Mr. Standish was replying: Cecilia strained to catch not merely each word but every inflexion of each word.

"That's too bad. We're most anxious to see her: we were so sorry to miss the wedding."

Ah! Cecilia could breathe again, though every breath hurt her.

The next moment John Harland stood by her side. "Good evening, Miss Brooke."

She mastered her disturbance by a great effort sufficiently to reply conventionally, and then, a sense of anger at the ease of his self-assurance coming to her rescue, she lifted her eyes firmly to his, and said with a quietness that surprised her,

"I did not expect to see you again, Sir John."

The reverberations of the gong and the throwing open of the door by the butler cut across the tensity of the moment.

"We won't be formal," said Lady Wraybourne. "Go on all of you, and I'll follow. Cecilia, my dear, give me your arm."

Obediently and gratefully Cecilia went across to her: she had never known Lady Wraybourne accept of help before, still less ask for it; but she

felt it was the old lady's way of showing that she was not angry with her. At any rate, whatever the reason, it was the most welcome of commands. She followed with Lady Wraybourne slowly down the stairs, and by the time they gained the dining-room she was mistress of her stirred emotions. How dared he return like this? And without a trace either of shame or remembrance. She was royally angry, and more beautiful than she had ever been.

Her anger did not abate when she found that her place at table was next to his and that he was not willing to let that pass without comment.

"You're here, Miss Brooke," he said as she entered and paused a moment uncertainly: he indicated the seat on his left with a gesture that seemed to her strained senses an intentional annoyance.

She gave him in silence a flashing, defiant look and, sitting down, turned at once to her neighbour on her other side, Mrs. Corbillion, and made an immediate conquest of that lady's heart by the admiration she lavished on Toutou, the Persian cat, as the readiest defence that occurred to her ruffled mind. She could not, however, use a cat as conversation all through dinner, even though Mrs. Corbillion, once started on her favourite which lay with languid grace across her ample lap, flowed on abundantly: apart from their defensive value, Cecilia was not greatly interested in cats, and her attention wandered. She then discovered that she

need not have devoted herself so intently to Mrs. Corbillion: John Harland was not waiting to pounce upon her the second she was disengaged. On the contrary, he was talking with much animation to Miss Marchant; he was apparently in the best of spirits and was both amusing and amused. Cecilia was so inconsistent as to find that his inattention fed her sense of anger even more thoroughly than his turning towards her. He laughed in answer to some remark by Miss Marchant, and she was shot through with a sudden spasm, a wave of emotion, unreasonable, unidentified, and terribly lacerating.

Mrs. Corbillion's conversation was then claimed by Mr. Standish, and Cecilia sat free for her right-hand neighbour: still that neighbour paid no heed. She tried to be glad, but every turn of his hand, every tone of his voice held a meaning and a memory that stabbed her heart with pain. Presently, however, conversation grew general: Miss Marchant spoke across Mrs. Standish to Lady Wraybourne, and John Harland spoke to her.

"Resuming our conversation where it was interrupted by the gong," he said lightly, "you meant of course that you didn't expect to see me again this evening, not that you never expected to see me any more at all, I hope?"

She bit her lip, and anger predominated over pain. "I don't know what I meant," she answered with all the carelessness in her power. "I don't remember what we were saying."

He admitted the stroke by a swift side-glance, but continued in the same light tone as before, "When I'm at Hartley Harland, I'm constantly over here, you know. Felicity and Dan are the children of one of my best friends and I've known them since they were born, off and on, that is."

Cecilia made no reply, though he paused for one. He went on, "And Lady Wraybourne's a dear, isn't she?"

"She has been very kind to me," answered Cecilia tonelessly.

"So I run in and out as I like."

"That must be very nice for Lady Wraybourne."

"And for me."

Again Cecilia made no answer: he was trying to extract from her some admission; let him try. Like all men, the one thing he could not abide was to be ignored: so much the worse for him. She hardened her heart and would have turned away but for his direct question, "Have you been with Lady Wraybourne long, Miss Brooke?"

She looked at him: their eyes met directly. She saw in his no recognition at all, merely a polite questioning: it was intolerable, he was making sport of her secretly. She flushed up and was about to answer him with cold formality, when Lady Wraybourne broke in from the end of the table,

"Not long, John, and not stopping either, I'm afraid."

He looked at Lady Wraybourne swiftly: the news, Cecilia noted, was unexpected by him; that

again, she thought, was characteristic of a man's mind, to suppose that she would remain quietly, calmly there as a target for his private archery.

"I'm sure," he said politely, "Miss Brooke must have some good reason."

"Too dull here," explained Lady Wraybourne. "I'm not surprised. But she's not leaving me or the children at once, of course: she's with us till Easter when Evelyn and Walter'll be home. So we must make the most of her till then."

"I see," he answered slowly.

Mrs. Standish helped Cecilia by leaning across the table from beside Miss Marchant and saying to her, "Are you a restless person too, Miss Brooke?"

"Too?" queried Cecilia.

"Like Sir John, I mean. He's a born wanderer; and hasn't settled down even now."

"I saw a photograph of him in one of the illustrated papers only the other day," said Cecilia, glad of the opportunity to emphasize to John her belief that in coming to Darlingby she had done nothing to bring herself back into his life, "on the west coast of Africa. That's why I was so surprised to see him here to-day."

"West coast of Africa?" interjected John.

"You were there two years ago, John," said Lady Wraybourne.

"Ah, yes, so I was."

"The papers got hold of an old photograph, I suppose. I saw it too, in *The Tatler* or one of those papers, I think."

"Very misleading," he said quietly.

"They ought to be more careful," cried Cecilia warmly.

"That is so," he answered, turning at once to her with an air of politeness, "but it's not a thing that mattered—in this case at all events."

Cecilia was silenced. It had mattered greatly and he knew it and he knew that she knew it; but she could not then say so.

The next moment the conversation veered to the subject she had most dreaded. Mr. Standish bent forward in his place on Lady Wraybourne's right to say,

"Those trips must be a thing of the past obviously. You could hardly take Lady Harland to the Gold Coast."

"Hardly," murmured John.

"Where is she?" asked Mr. Standish. "I'm most anxious to pay my respects to her. If it hadn't been for that confounded bronchitis I'd have braved England, even in November, to be at your wedding."

"I'm sure of it," replied John.

"What have you done with her?"

"What have I done with her?" repeated John, elevating his eyebrows quizzically. "What a question to ask a man in the twentieth century! As though any man had the least control now over any woman! It isn't a fair question, is it, Miss Brooke? You'll support me, I know."

He spoke in the most airy manner possible: it

seemed to Cecilia not only that he was putting that on so as to avoid arousing in the minds of all but one of his audience the slightest suspicion that he had anything to conceal, but also that he was genuinely enjoying the situation, by reason of his knowledge that one person was present to whom his double meaning was plain and yet correction or open resentment was forbidden. At the same time, and very inconsistently, her heart leapt within her. Could he conceivably have answered so if the woman in the train were his wife? He was aiming at her, Cecilia: she was his target and for all the pain of the arrows she rejoiced at their direction. She must do what lay in her power to make sure, but in her heart she had gained certainty. The opportunity of private speech was not now with her. He had paused in delicate irony for her expression of support; as that was not forthcoming, he continued in light answer to Mr. Standish,

“Unsupported, that’s sad. It’s true, any way. Lady Harland’s visiting. I wanted her with me, but no, she had other ideas. I believe, myself, she didn’t want to see Hartley Harland for the first time in ceremony, and they’d have had a triumphal arch and all that sort of thing, given half a chance.”

“When do you expect her, then?”

“No date fixed. She’s been there, you know, just casually, to have a look at the old place and see if she liked it.”

“And of course she went into raptures to you over it?” queried Mrs. Standish.

"No, I wouldn't say that."

"Then she must have most peculiar ideas of beauty."

Cecilia could hardly sit still: this was almost beyond endurance. If John agreed with the last supposition, it would be, quite.

It was with an odd little sense of unlooked-for warmth that she heard his answer given with a touch of seriousness for the first time, "Those who feel most can't as a rule put their feelings into words, Mrs. Standish."

"That's profoundly true," exclaimed Mrs. Corbillion, with a dramatically expressive glance at Toutou and an obvious stroking of his sleek smoothness.

"But all the same, my dear fellow," remarked Mr. Standish, "you're very remiss. If Lady Harland doesn't want to come to Hartley Harland yet, what are you doing up here all by yourself?"

"Business; can't get away from it. Marriage doesn't free one from it, unfortunately."

"No, but I suppose it's only a fleeting visit."

"I'm not sure. I don't find Yorkshire as dull as Miss Brooke does. We must brighten it for her, Lady Wraybourne."

"Please don't bother about me," Cecilia found strength to answer, trying to make her voice do more things than it could. She wished to convey to the company in general a polite rejection of any proposal to bring her, the humble governess, into prominence; she wished to suggest to Lady Wray-

bourne that her life needed no brightening whilst with her; she wished, most of all, to show the mocking man she had married that he would find in her no source of fun. She was not successful, in her last aim at any rate: John was quick to take advantage of her remark, saying with a simulation of great courtesy, "It'll be no bother: it'll be a pleasure, of course."

Cecilia could have slapped him: with difficulty she made no reply, but she was momentarily eased by Mr. Standish's persistence in saying,

"Well, I'm disappointed. Eleanor and I've been so much looking forward to meeting Lady Harland; and now you say she's not here and you don't know when she will be."

"Did I say that?" inquired John with innocence.

"Certainly you did."

"Then of course I didn't speak the truth: I very seldom do. But all the same Lady Harland's still at the delightfully impulsive stage of life. She loves sudden decisions, and I never quite know what she'll resolve to do next. She's here to-day and gone to-morrow, as you might say. Rather your position, Miss Brooke, isn't it, in a fashion?"

He bowed very slightly towards her, and then, before she could speak, turned to Miss Marchant and began a diversion on the delights of not making up one's mind about plans till the very last minute which was amusingly phrased and made the others laugh.

Cecilia sat on silent, trying to distinguish between

her anger and her relief. He had mocked her, but he had also defended her, and it was evident that he had contrived to keep her desertion of him concealed even from his old friends. Her thoughts were still whirling chaotically when Lady Wraybourne rose from the table.

In the drawing-room Cecilia felt her continued presence unnecessary. Miss Marchant was talking clothes to Mrs. Corbillion, and Mrs. Standish had much to say to Lady Wraybourne. As the fifth wheel on the social coach she felt she could quietly roll away; and she longed intensely to be alone. She was unnerved and very wildly tossed on the heaving waters of emotion. She had sat next to her husband a whole hour and she did not know what to think of him or the situation in which she now found herself. Was Hamlet's knowledge right, that a man could smile and be a villain? John had been at once maddening, self-assured, provocative, inconsequent, and lit with all his old attraction. Was he insensitive or one of those who, as he said, because they feel, use words as a screen? Did it matter which he was? There was still the woman in the train, whether he had married her or not, and there was still the unattractive little boy. Such was the glamour of John's presence that she was in danger already of forgetting both: that was pitifully weak of her; but she was weak, to-night at least. She would no longer expose her weakness: she would slip upstairs, to the nursery where she belonged.

She rose and approached Lady Wraybourne to explain that she felt she should be returning to her charges.

"He's a dear fellow," she heard Lady Wraybourne say, "one of the most trustworthy characters I know, and I've known him all his life."

"You weren't at the wedding?" asked Mrs. Standish.

"No, I had influenza, and it knocked me up—which reminds me, I've never even sent John a present. How very forgetful of me!"

Cecilia stopped: she pretended to be busy replacing a daffodil half fallen from a vase. There was no evil in listening to an open conversation, and against her will it allured her terribly.

"I hope the marriage is turning out well," remarked Mrs. Standish primly. "His language is rather offhand, as though he wasn't very much in love."

"Just like him to pretend: he's a romantic at heart, you know, and it's his humour to conceal it. He was very amusing at dinner, I thought."

"Yes, but a trifle irresponsible."

"He enjoyed trying to mystify Oliver, I could see."

"In other words, Sarah, you would admit it, if you weren't so fond of him, that he has not been steadied by marriage in the least."

"My dear Eleanor," replied Lady Wraybourne with sudden warmth, "John's a well-developed sense of humour, thank heavens, but there's no one

I know who requires steadying less or has a keener feeling for his responsibilities."

"I'm glad to hear you say so. Marriage is a responsibility, even in these days."

"I suppose so, sometimes," replied Lady Wraybourne drily.

Cecilia could listen no longer: it seemed to her excited brain that all conversations led consciously or unconsciously to her and that each ended in a sting. Saying to Lady Wraybourne as naturally as possible that she would run up and see if the children were sound asleep, she went quickly to the door to avoid detention.

She had delayed too long: either John had found Mr. Standish dull or he had hurried to anticipate her. She met him in the doorway, and, again taken unaware, lost the moment to speak first and pass. He at once said, "Well met, Miss Brooke. You might tell me more about that photograph of me you saw in the papers."

Vanity, vanity; all men, thought Cecilia, were at heart the same, egoists always. Aloud she said with a pose of carelessness that brought an instant's twinkle into his eyes, "I don't remember much about it, I'm afraid, Sir John. I just happened to see it casually."

"Where did it say I was?"

"At Accra, I think."

"Yes, I was photographed on my visit there, but that's ages ago."

"A very good photograph too," interjected Lady

Wraybourne from her chair : " you gave me a copy, I remember, John."

" Did I? Let's have a look at it."

" I've mislaid it, I'm afraid. I don't keep such trifles."

" You're quite right," he said heartily : " they're not meant to be kept; they soon clutter up a house."

" The papers have no business to be so careless," said Cecilia with a touch of asperity.

" They always are," added Mr. Standish. " Why, I remember seeing a notice saying you were off to America."

" A fabrication," said John quietly; " I saw it too, but it wasn't worth contradicting."

He half turned as he spoke to address Mr. Standish behind him. Cecilia, her ears tingling, took instant advantage of the moment : she slipped through the doorway and, before he had realized her departure, was hurrying up the stairs. His tone had been too quiet : she was as certain as though she were possessed of definite proof that he had himself inserted all the contradictory paragraphs she had seen.

CHAPTER XXV

IT was long before Cecilia lost consciousness in sleep that night. It seemed to her almost as though she had been caught up in a whirlwind so that she was spun helplessly, without power of direction. She had been a leaf torn from the tree, blown along hurtfully in the dirt, then she had come to a cranny where she had clung, and now she was again miserably in motion. John's proximity awoke in her a whole torrent of violently contradictory feelings: she was thrilled, she was enraged, she was happy, she was wretched. She had touched him and he had flamed in her, she had talked with him and he had mocked her: he had pretended to have had no previous knowledge of her, and by word, look, and gesture he had proved that she was continually in his mind. What was the meaning of that lacerating spasm that had been hers when he had laughed so pleasurably at some remark by Miss Marchant? Could it by any possibility have been jealousy? How could she be jealous when by her own impulse she had cast him finally away? She must not allow herself to be so inconsistent, so silly, and so weak. Tortured by her thoughts, Cecilia was a great while wasting sleep.

March came in more mild even than a lamb. When Cecilia, usually awake long before the children, was pulled out of the many fathoms of slumber into which she had at last fallen by Felicity's clambering into her bed, it was a delicious spring morning, with rejoicing birds and ripening buds. The cooing of wood-pigeons from the trees bordering the lawns came soothingly into her ears. She was desperately sleepy, and the snuggling Felicity was full of questions, supported eagerly a few minutes later by the rosy, yellow-headed rascal who clambered in on her other side.

"Tell us about the mummy and the daddy pigeon," demanded Felicity.

"Coo-coo-coo," corroborated Danny with enthusiasm.

No plea for mercy availed: they would have the story Cecilia had made up one day when listening to the pigeons answering each other; it was very simple and had such an appeal to both that it was in constant demand. She was dreadfully tired of it, and to have it exacted when her eyelids refused to keep open was akin to cruelty. She raced through it accordingly, telling how a daddy pigeon called to a mummy 'to help him build a nest in a green tree', and how she answered that she 'would come and live with him'. Then one day 'tap, tap, tap, and out of the egg came the Shishiti coo-coo'.

"And Danny!" shrieked that young man excitedly. "The Danny coo-coo first!"

A dispute at once arose and waxed energetically over her prostrate body : Felicity was justly incensed at the jumping of her claim to be born first and Danny was never one meekly to be second.

"I shan't tell you anything more if you can't keep still," at last protested the joggled and pushed narratrix : she took the story of the coo-coos to its conclusion, past the excitement of the first flight, until "they all lived happily ever after—at least," she added in a low voice, "they didn't. No one ever does."

This heresy was stoutly combated by Felicity : Cecilia, to defend it, evolved a version wherein the Cecilia pigeon flew away and found a darling little nest with just two baby pigeons in it, and so she stayed and looked after them.

"And what next d'you know?" asked Felicity, always avid for more.

"And then the mummy and daddy came back and the Cecilia coo-coo flew away very sadly, all by herself."

This was a complete failure : Felicity entirely declined to accept it in any form. She clung to Cecilia touchingly and a tearful argument ensued, interrupted by Danny who remarked with great cheerfulness, "There's a 'ickle black and white f'og in the day-nursley."

Felicity checked her tears at this and grinned understandingly at Cecilia. Pleased with the reception of his inaccurate irrelevance, Danny

burrowed down like a caterpillar into its cocoon and murmured, "Tell me 'nudder 'tawly."

"No more stories," cried Cecilia. "We're late already." She jumped out of bed and the day began.

In spite of the freshness of the first of the March mornings, Cecilia's energy soon flagged. She was jaded after her wretched night and the conflicting winds of her emotions, and she shrank from company. It was with real gratitude that she heard Agnes volunteer to relieve her with the task of taking the children out for their usual run till midday when Danny slept and Felicity was supposed to rest. She accepted at once and the children, always agog for anything fresh and full of whispered mischief, were got ready and departed under Agnes's charge.

Cecilia had more than an hour to herself and she employed it ill. The children's unchequered gaiety, the warm and fragrant beauty of the early spring increased her melancholy: she felt so old and unwanted, and she wished for a bleak and bitter day of rain. If she had not been so tired, she would have been greatly vexed with herself for her weakness: as it was, all the earth, except herself, seemed happy, and she, by reason of the contrast, an unfortunate indeed. She leaned out of the window, thinking, trying to tell herself not to be such a coward, and failing dismally. It was contrast, contrast that was the curse: she had been battling her way gradually up the steep

slope to contentment until he, the one he in the world for her always, had reappeared so startlingly at her side.

Having reached the lowest rung of her ladder of unhappiness, she saw Agnes wandering by herself in the garden below. For a few moments the sight conveyed no particular message to her: then with a climb back to ordinary, practical affairs she remembered the children, and called to her. Agnes, willing but at no time intelligent, answered back to say she had lost them: they had, she complained, disobeyed her and deliberately and successfully hidden themselves. Cecilia, with a glance at her watch and a smile for Agnes, outwitted by two monkeys, descended to search, retrieve, and reprimand.

She had not to go far for success. Felicity, she reflected, had an ingenious mind and a good sense of direction: Danny alone might have gone anywhere; with his temptress and guide his way was fixed. Felicity had admired the little summer shelter, round behind out of sight at the end of the garden, the few times she had been taken in that direction: she was certain to have headed for it now. Cecilia's reasoning was rewarded: as she neared the shelter she heard Felicity's clear, young voice, "But they didn't. 'Cilia says nobody never does; she said so this morning."

Cecilia paused: the child had evidently gathered some one in for audience. It gave her a sudden irrepressible leap of heart when from within the

shelter she heard the deep voice of John Harland utter her name, "Well, Cecilia's wrong. People always live happily ever after in all the fairy tales."

"'Cilia's never wrong," declared the loyal Felicity.

"Watch me hop, will 'oo?" inquired Danny's voice from the further corner: he was evidently of the opinion that it was time for this feminine form of talk to yield to action, himself as protagonist; the bumping sound of a very inexperienced hopper proceeded.

"I don't say she's often wrong," conceded John: "but a princess simply must live happily ever after or she isn't a princess."

"'Cilia's a princess," asserted Felicity.

"I believe she is, a princess in disguise."

"What's 'guise?"

"Oh, well, dressed up, you know. Are you awfully fond of her?"

Silence. Cecilia, listening with shining eyes, could well visualize the affectionate Felicity, unable to find words for any direct answer to such a question, nodding her head wisely up and down with a delighted grin on her round, happy face. Silence, however, where Felicity and Danny were concerned, was far too fragile ever to last: it was broken now by Danny, tired of hopping, "Tell me a 'tawly."

There was a sound of pushing and squeezing, a quick grunt of discomfort from a labouring

climber, an eager, "Tell me!" from Felicity, followed by a "Not tell Shishiti; tell me sum'fing," from Danny, and then John's amused voice,

"This is all very well, but how am I to tell you something and not Felicity?"

Very cautiously Cecilia peeped round the corner of the shelter. It was an engaging sight that met her eyes. In the centre of the garden seat sat John, knees apart: on one knee was perched Danny, supported by one of John's hands whilst he did acrobatics in the way of seeing how far he could lean outwards, at a considerable and entirely ignored strain to his supporter; on the other sprawled Felicity, in an attitude extremely indecorous but also entirely affectionate and comfortable. John seemed entirely content to have two pairs of earthy shoes kicking away at his legs, and to be enjoying himself with great simplicity of satisfaction. What struck Cecilia was the very unusually complete acceptance of him by the children—and for all their sensitive affection they did not take at all readily to those with whom they were not familiar—and also, and even more, his absolute acceptance of them. He was not merely as though he were amused by them but as though he had never been without them.

"What am I to tell you?" he asked.

"I know an 'ickle f'og," said Danny, who, having recently been given a china frog, was impressed with the reality of its existence and determined to impress others also: as an answer

to John's question the statement lacked something, as Felicity felt.

"Tell me about Micky Mocky Moo," she demanded.

"But he belongs to Cecilia," John objected. "You told me he did."

"Well, but I'll let you have him."

"Won't she mind?"

"'Cilia doesn't mind anything. Why, when Danny poured all his porridge over his face, she just laughed. Danny's a very naughty little boy, you know."

"Danny very good boy," on the contrary asserted Danny unexpectedly: he wriggled down on to his feet, unable to sit still for more than a few seconds.

"Go on about Micky Mocky Moo," insisted Felicity, and John obeyed.

Cecilia listened, enthralled. The being to which she had given the absurd name was her own very special play with Felicity, a little sprite who was always up to every form of mischief. "He's only 'tendy," Felicity used occasionally to whisper, "isn't he?" And Cecilia would then assure her that he was indeed only a pretence. The child adored the little comedies of Cecilia's invention and all the scrapes and mischiefs of Micky Mocky Moo: but until that hour no one, not even 'Grannibel' had ever been privileged to be a sharer of the jealously guarded secret of his creation. And here was John Harland, the usurper, plung-

ing in straight away to the very citadel of her dominions. He had a quaint conceit, and Felicity was thrilled at the astonishing adventures: even Danny gave up hopping, ceased squirming, and hanging over his knee listened greedily also. The conclusion of one adventure was at once so preposterous and so comically narrated that Cecilia forgot herself. She laughed aloud suddenly, and he looked swiftly round and saw her.

"Hail, princess!" he said instantly, unembarrassed. "Looking for me or for these piccaninies?"

Cecilia hardly knew whether she most admired the ready humour with which without a second's thought he threw himself into the situation or resented the easy impudence of his suggestion that she could conceivably be looking for him: she did not know by what emotion she was stirred; she was only aware that she was very powerfully stirred indeed. She wished she could reply with equal sportiveness, but that was at that moment impossible to her. The best she could do was to murmur,

"It happens to be the children. It's Danny's time for sleep."

"Lucky beggar!" exclaimed John, catching Danny who on realizing that Cecilia had not merely arrived but arrived for him was sliding away with clumsy haste: he picked him up as neatly as a good full-back at Rugby fields a bouncing ball and handed the wriggling rascal over into Cecilia's

arms. He and she were very close in the transference and their hands met by accident under Danny's contortions: once again Cecilia battled with the swift sensation of burning that ran up her arms, so unsuccessfully that she all but dropped Danny. Avoiding this, she yet could not hold him and so set him down with the injunction to come along with her. Felicity needed no injunction: she took Cecilia's hand and kissed it gently. It was done with the endearing charm of complete simplicity and it went straight to Cecilia's heart: she did not dare look at John to see how he noted the action.

"I want to see the 'killel!'" cried Danny, running off ahead of Cecilia as she turned. Felicity clapped her hands with enthusiasm, and in a moment the two were twenty yards away with surprising agility.

"Killel? What's that?" asked John. "I'm not there."

"Squirrel," said Cecilia. "Danny saw one in a tree the other day."

She followed after the children and John came with her. For the first time since she had left the compartment in the train—and that seemed æons of time ago, almost in a different existence altogether—she and he were alone together. An agitation of nervousness seized upon her and she could say no more at all. The quick humour that had lit up his face died out: it seemed that he too was terribly conscious of the fact that they were alone.

They paced some steps in a silence that increased Cecilia's agitation: he was the first to break through it.

"They're a happy little pair," he said suddenly.

"Yes."

"Felicity has great charm."

"Yes. I'm almost afraid for her."

"Afraid?"

"She's so sensitive she's bound to suffer."

"It is a pity to be too sensitive," he agreed with a quick side-glance. They walked on a moment in renewed silence.

Cecilia tried to find something she could put into words—anything rather than this speechless, throbbing companionship, but she could think of nothing. He again spoke first.

"Jolly things, children."

"Yes," she murmured.

"They're about the only things that make life worth while," he added with a touch of intensity unexpected by her.

"Yes," she repeated uneasily.

"You've made these two very fond of you."

"I'm glad."

"So am I."

To this she had no answer: she wished the garden were not so long. It was exquisite pain to be walking through it by his side: she feared every step that she would betray the degree of her feeling.

"It seems sad you should be leaving them so soon," he murmured.

"It's odious," she flashed at him, breaking suddenly out of her guarded restraint; "but how can I help it?"

"Are you seriously asking for my advice?" he answered quietly.

"No!" she cried instantly, impelled by a force she did not understand.

"I hardly supposed you were," he replied, unmoved. "I am of course insufficiently acquainted with the facts."

Cecilia could have burst into tears. The golden moment was shattered, the opportunity for some interchange of knowledge, even for explanation, if explanation ever could be possible, was lost. They were still utterly distant, she felt, one from the other, walking on different sides of icy barriers of misconception and pain, he was still resolute in his mockery of her—and across the lawn towards them was sailing the solid body of Mrs. Corbillion, followed with delicate steps by her Persian favourite, Toutou. In all Cecilia's world there was but one tiny note of music: unless the surge of her longing deceived her, she heard, softly uttered from between John's outwardly smiling lips, a delicious, heartening 'damn!'

"Did you find the children, Sir John?" asked Mrs. Corbillion, bearing down upon them graciously.

"I did, but we've lost them again," he answered with quickness. "Elusive little monkeys: no wonder Miss Brooke finds them too much for her."

"I don't, really I don't," cried Cecilia.

"But Lady Wraybourne said you're leaving."

"Yes, but——"

"It's not the place for her, is it, Mrs. Corbillion?"

"Children are trials," agreed that lady heavily. "They're not like cats. Now Toutou, if he's properly brushed and taken care of, gives no trouble at all, do you, darling?" It seemed a propitious moment for the idea that had germinated in Mrs. Corbillion's mind. "You're really leaving here, Miss Brooke?" she asked.

"As soon as ever Mr. and Mrs. Baird return. I—I've got to stay till then."

"Quite, and after that?"

"I—I don't exactly know."

"Then come to me."

"To you, Mrs. Corbillion?"

"Yes, I realized last night that you're just the person I need. Come to me and take charge of my precious Toutou."

At this point John Harland laughed. With a face of flame Cecilia whirled on him, gave him one furious glance, answered Mrs. Corbillion shakenly, "Thank you, I'll think about it; I must find the children now," and darted away desperately in the direction of the squirrel's tree, from the line of which she had been lured by the magic of John's company. A cat's companion! And it had amused him! Tears of mortification leapt scaldingly into her eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI

CECILIA did not see John Harland again that day, nor did she so much as hear him mentioned. She did not know whether he returned immediately to the solitudes of Hartley Harland, or sunned himself in the company of Lady Wraybourne and her guests: neither did she gain enlightenment as to the impression she had made upon Mrs. Corbillion by fleeing so abruptly from the offer that that lady had graciously extended to her. She hustled the children through their luncheon and, timing her exit carefully, was out of the house and away with them for their afternoon walk without encountering a soul. On her return she found to her great relief a message from Lady Wraybourne to say that she would be motor-ing late that afternoon and would therefore not expect the children down. She romped with them with a feverish abandon that intoxicated them with glee, gave them their baths delightfully indifferent to splashes, craftily sent Agnes away and then sent word downstairs that she could not desert the nursery that evening.

Alone by the fire, she played see-saw with herself. She longed to see John again, to be with

him alone and be gifted with the power of speech : she hoped also that she would never, never again be in his presence to be so tormented. It was not, as she was honest enough to recognize, his sole responsibility that she suffered such agonies : if much sprang from the policy of refusal to recognize her that he had deliberately adopted, much also was due to his mere presence, for which she could not hold him to blame. He might indeed have absented himself altogether from Darlingby on the discovery that she was there : but did she wish that ? Could she truly say to her heart that it was terrible to her that he had returned at once, and sought her out a third time the very next morning ? Not terrible, but wonderful. Even now she could not believe it : she was moving in a mist, with nothing solid or certain before her eyes and little enough of substance under her feet.

How strange it had been to see and hear him in the shelter, talking to the children ! It had somehow been so unexpected : not merely had she been, as twice before in quick succession, totally unprepared for his appearance, but his whole occupation, manner, and tone had taken her by surprise. Ever since her descent from the train she had been creating a picture of him in her mind, she had been combating all those old memories of his sunny humour and deep tenderness and quick appreciation that had caused her to fall in love with him by recalling to herself the image of the woman and the little boy : so alone could she justify her swift

and absolute abandonment of him. He was not the man she had thought; she had never known him.

It was therefore with the strength of a new revelation that she once again became aware of the existence in him of those qualities in which she once had so firmly believed—the whole pain of her disillusion had come from the firmness of that belief: it had meant a tearing apart of the very tissues of her soul. Now in a calmer hour, when, no longer dizzy with happiness and trembling on the threshold of a new and strange existence, she could examine and reflect, the re-creation of her husband was a deeply disturbing force. She had seen him, almost against her will, not as during these dark weeks she had felt herself forced to see him, but as she had seen him in the halcyon days of her engagement. He mocked her, it was true, and for that she owed him anger, but in no degree was his bearing that of a man whose guilty secret had been surprised: more, in no degree was it that of a man who had a guilty secret to be surprised. Was it possible that she had deceived herself? Had some chance word, chance likeness so worked upon her abnormally agitated mind as to cause her to give undue credence to a discreditable, faith-shattering connexion? If that were so, she had been terribly wrong—and yet her memory, reproducing with torturing exactness all the details of that devastating interview, the words the woman had used and the unmistakable appearance of the little boy, refused to allow

her to think so. The little boy was indubitably a Harland: there was no avoidance of that truth. The woman had stated, both specifically and by every implication, that her words had reference to Sir John Harland: she had no conceivable reason to lie to a stranger, and John had no double. What a tangle of agonizing briers it all was! Cecilia's reason compelled her to disbelieve in him, and her heart cried out to her that it was worse than folly so to do.

She turned, despairing, from that problem to the lesser, but still wounding, memory of his laughter at Mrs. Corbillion's suggestion. The sound had pierced through the armour with which she had sought to gird herself: it had stung her so sharply that she had not been able to control her speech or movement. Why? Looking back upon it, Cecilia wondered. At the moment it had seemed born of pure malice, an ungenerous triumphing over the lowliness to which she was reduced: as such it had been beyond endurance. But was that the right interpretation? This also, reviewed in a calmer hour, bore a different aspect. In misfortune one's sense of humour is apt to be mislaid: in happier days it would have seemed, so Cecilia was forced to admit to herself, a matter for laughter that she, who was no cat lover, should have been singled out by such a solemn mistress as Mrs. Corbillion as the one person needed for the precious Persian. Or, again, was it not in reality, that laugh that had stabbed so cruelly in her ears, a sound

that had been directed against Mrs. Corbillion? What if John had laughed noting the serene assurance of the offerer and knowing, from his past knowledge of Cecilia, the attitude of mind in which she would receive the suggestion? But John was behaving as though he had no past knowledge of her: the problem was to discover how far he was consistent or inconsistent with himself. 'What would I not give,' murmured Cecilia longingly to herself, 'if only I could for one moment see clearly down to the depths of his heart!' The thought was instantly tempered by the reflection that she had nothing of worth in all the world to give, except only her two rings, the one of her wedding of no value to any one else and imbued only with pain to her and the other of that impossibly happy engagement, the remembrance of which was wine gone bitter to the taste. So throughout a lonely evening Cecilia tormented herself without profit.

It was not until the following afternoon that she had any talk with Lady Wraybourne: as she was entering the house with the children after their outing, which she had taken in the furthest direction from Hartley Harland, she met Lady Wraybourne in the little side-hall through which she had to pass. Felicity and Danny ran to meet their 'Grannibel,' with that exuberant welcome which is a crown upon any adult to receive, but it was apparent that it was not specially to see them that Lady Wraybourne had happened to be there. She greeted them both appropriately but looked over their

bobbing heads at Cecilia with humorously pursed-up lips, and then asked, "And what have you been doing to one of my guests, pray?"

Cecilia's heart misgave her: did Lady Wraybourne mean John, and had he betrayed her identity or been complaining of her? She drew herself erect, tautened to meet whatever might betide, and answered nervously, "What's happened?"

"Don't be alarmed," replied Lady Wraybourne mischievously. "I'm terribly grateful to you. You've done for me what I couldn't do for myself."

"'Cilia very clever," observed Felicity.

"So'm I, very clever boy," asserted Danny.

He was at once contradicted by his sister crushingly and, as he was quite unwilling to be crushed, a private argument developed on the normal lines of juvenile obstinacy, unheeded by their elders.

"What have I done?" inquired Cecilia, relieved.

"I can forgive a person for being wicked so much more easily than I can for being dull," answered Lady Wraybourne rather irrelevantly. "To bore is the worst of all crimes, in a guest at all events, and of all bores the most unending is a cat's cradle. I thought I'd got to put up with her for a week, but, thanks to you, she's gone."

"But I've done nothing!"

"Nothing? My dear, you underrate the sensitiveness of a prize Persian! According to Mrs. Corbillion, you gave it a shock it'll take a month to get over! She was ages getting it to earth again."

"But what did I do?"

"Raced across the lawn, trod on its tail, sent it flying up a tree—and just after the trustful owner had offered you the post of keeper. John Harland told me it was one of the funniest things he's seen for a long time; he said she was bursting with indignation and trying to coax the brute down from its bough at the same time."

"I never saw it or I'd——"

"Don't depreciate your merits. She came in at last petting the creature disgustingly and told me all through lunch that her faith in human nature was shattered."

"I'm dreadfully sorry."

"I'm not. She was still talking about it when she left this morning." Lady Wraybourne paused, laughed, and then added more seriously, "If you're determined to leave, at least you won't be going to Mrs. Corbillion. Not that that would have done in any case. You leave it to me: I'll find something for you."

Cecilia murmured her thanks with a sudden pang of emptiness, disentangled the children who were now struggling, silent and locked together in tenacity, for the undivided possession of some sticks they had brought in, consoled the weaker Danny, reproved Felicity, and took them both upstairs. All the way up and through tea her mind was busy, as far as the children allowed, with the amusement of John Harland, wondering what exactly he had said and in what tone he had said it.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT was the custom at Darlingby that when there were visitors the children were not brought down to the drawing-room after tea as a matter of course but only by request. Cecilia did not know whether to be relieved or disappointed that she had been allowed to take them up without anything having been said as to their reappearance. She passed a quiet hour with them in the day-nursery, both children being unusually good; Felicity was extremely busy rearranging the furniture in her dolls' house and Danny, who was nothing if not imitative, thereupon occupied himself most diligently in sticking all the grasses, buds, and bits of stick he had acquired in the course of the afternoon into the dolls' house he had insisted upon receiving also as a present—he called his occupation “putting vi’lets in my do’ house”; why, he was either not competent or else unwilling to explain.

Cecilia was able to continue with little interruption her ache of wondering. Peace was slightly interfered with by the beginnings of a squabble as to the ownership of an extremely battered and headless doll, but by that time it was Danny's

hour for bed, and division restored harmony at once.

As soon as both children were tucked up and murmuring themselves to sleep, Cecilia ran downstairs and, after sorting out the miscellanea that collected like flotsam at the bottom of the perambulator, looked in, in passing through the hall, at the dining-room table. Places were laid for four only : that seemed an assurance that John was not expected. Cecilia knew at last by the feeling of flatness that immediately possessed her that her earlier ignorance was mere self-deception. His appearance or absence mattered to her terribly : it was the one thing in her life that did matter. And yet to what end ? She was greatly vexed with herself for the uselessness of her longing.

She was moving away to return upstairs when the butler entered and asked her if he were to lay for her also. Up to the moment of that inquiry she had intended to dine upstairs whether John came or stayed away, but, being faced with the necessity for immediate and normal decision, she answered in the contrary sense. On regaining the nursery, she found a message from Lady Wraybourne expecting her down to dinner and was glad that there was no need for her either to contradict her direction to the butler or to send an excuse to her employer. She was listless and at a loss : a solitary evening would, she was sure, have merely added to her consciousness of grievous dissatisfaction with life.

She delayed her descent to the drawing-room till the gong rang and then sped down with steps of trepidation: John might have come or be coming notwithstanding appearances. She sighed to herself when she discovered that he certainly was not: Lady Wraybourne, Mr. and Mrs. Standish, and Miss Marchant were all down and only delaying, it seemed, for her. She apologized, but found her words unnecessary.

"We know what children are, these children at any rate," said Lady Wraybourne, smiling very affectionately at her.

Cecilia forbore to say that both Felicity and Danny had been fast asleep for at least half an hour: she felt oddly guilty and ashamed of all her hesitations. How kind Lady Wraybourne was to her and how hateful was the necessity that drove her forth into the wilderness again, a veritable scapegoat for a sin not her own! Let her enjoy what she could whilst she could: soon she would be among strangers, a dependant of no account. It struck her with unusual force during dinner that here in the gracious atmosphere of Darlingby she was treated by all with a courtesy she was never again likely to experience: Lady Wraybourne had undertaken to help her to a fresh place, an assurance that she would receive kindly consideration, but here she was one with her employer, regarded for all her humble station as in all respects an equal. And not by Lady Wraybourne alone: Mr. and Mrs. Standish conversed with her with simplicity

and enjoyment, even the rich and well-dressed Miss Marchant affected no airs of superiority towards her. Cecilia was touched, and in the warmth of the feeling her delicate complexion gained just the extra degree of colour that it needed for beauty; her hazel eyes began to sparkle and her laughter, like the immortal little brook of Coleridge, to sing a quiet tune. She was not happy, she never could be happy again, but at least it was occasionally within her power to give a very attractive appearance of happiness.

It was as she was laughing at an anecdote amusingly related by Mr. Standish after dinner was over and they were once again in the drawing-room that she overheard a few sentences that drove laughter from her lips.

"What an unusually attractive girl Miss Brooke is," she first heard Mrs. Standish say to Lady Wraybourne in what the speaker believed to be an undertone.

Cecilia heard no more of Lady Wraybourne's low reply than the concluding words, "lovely to-night."

"The prospect of freedom, I suppose," Mrs. Standish rejoined. "Looking after children can't be much fun for a girl of her class. I expect she's only taken it up temporarily just for something to do: what's her history?"

"Oh," Cecilia then heard Lady Wraybourne say, the words being uttered with the distinctness of surprise, "you think she's glad to go? P'raps you're right; that hadn't struck me."

Cecilia was switched suddenly into misery : not for the world would she consciously have given Lady Wraybourne that impression. Mr. Standish was disappointed with the reception of the conclusion of his anecdote, and it had begun so well too : he could not understand it. The best part lay in the final sentence and that won him not even a smile : he was thanked politely, but without responsiveness, and almost immediately afterwards deserted. He drifted, discouraged, to the neighbourhood of his wife ; Cecilia, longing to slip away yet fearful of strengthening thereby the false impression she had so disastrously given, moved sadly to the book-case with the pretence of effecting a needed rearrangement of its contents.

She was close to Lady Wraybourne, who had turned towards Miss Marchant, and she tried by an expressively appealing glance to show her how erroneous Mrs. Standish's thought had been. She met Lady Wraybourne's eyes, but could not gather from them whether she had at all conveyed her meaning, and the next moment Lady Wraybourne was engaged in conversation and looking away again. For several minutes Cecilia, self-absorbed, heard nothing, and then out of the dejection of her mind she caught the name that could never fail to cause her heart to vibrate. The talk had veered to John : they were discussing the beauties of Hartley Harland. Embarrassed and yet fascinated she lingered by the book-case, drinking in each word : they had slipped into the subject that

concerned her more than any one in the world, and she had no part in it.

"I should like very much to go over it," Miss Marchant was saying. "It's one of the places I've always wanted to see."

"You shall," answered Lady Wraybourne. "John told me to bring every one who cared to come any day I liked."

"I hope he's going to settle down there and make a real home of it at last," said Mr. Standish.

"If his wife lets him, he will," remarked Mrs. Standish. "He's always adored the place, but she doesn't sound attracted somehow—or attractive, for that matter."

"Now, Eleanor," protested her husband mildly, "we know nothing about the new Lady Harland."

"That's just what I'm complaining about," retorted his wife.

"John's satisfied, that's the great thing," remarked Lady Wraybourne. "He doesn't say much, but I know him well enough to read between the lines. He's terribly in love, and after three months too."

Cecilia heard and trembled so violently that she feared she would betray herself: she sank into a chair and opened the book she had been holding idly in her hand and bent her unseeing eyes upon it as though in deep study. None of the four speakers glanced in her direction: so she remained motionless throughout a moment of the most agonizing beauty. 'Satisfied'? Oh, what in the

world could be meant by such a word? And could it conceivably be that Lady Wraybourne's knowledge of him was right? Cecilia's blood, that had rushed to her cheeks wildly, drained out of them again as she contemplated this impossibility. As a voice far away, she heard Mrs. Standish's reply, "Three months isn't much. Why isn't he with her or she with him?"

"You'd better ask him," responded Lady Wraybourne brightly. "All I know is what he tells me, and he says he's frightfully busy seeing to everything."

"It had been fearfully let down," said Mr. Standish. "I remember it in the days of old Sir John——"

"The present one's father?" inquired Miss Marchant.

"No, his uncle, a splendid fellow. He was a great friend of mine. He took a real pride in the place."

"I gather John does too," said Lady Wraybourne: "I've not been over there for a long while, but I know there's been a lot done to it."

"It needed it after the way it had been neglected," said Mr. Standish warmly. "Scandalous to see a fine old place in the wrong hands; but what could one expect? He was not only a waster but just the sort of waster that does the most harm."

"De mortuis——" said Lady Wraybourne.

"Oh, I know, and now that he is dead, least said

soonest mended, I suppose. It's not exactly a nice thing to say, I know, but I must confess I wasn't made miserable by the news."

"What news?" inquired Miss Marchant. "Who are you speaking of?"

"I forgot you hadn't known the family. Old Sir John, my friend, was to be envied in every respect but one: he had a rotten son, rotten in every way. The last Sir John Harland had peculiar tastes, spent money like water, never came near either Hartley Harland or Garston, and left a nice little crop of troubles for his cousin, the present man."

"Are they all called John, then?"

"As a rule."

"They always are, Oliver," corrected Mrs. Standish: "it's one of their family foibles, very confusing too. All Johns and all with that unusual head of hair."

"Thereby hangs a tale," murmured Mr. Standish, "at least if Mrs. Gossip speaks true."

"As she invariably does, of course," put in Lady Wraybourne. "What does she say this time?"

"Well, I—er," stammered Mr. Standish. "Nothing that I believe, naturally; I've known John Harland too long."

"What are they saying about him?" inquired Lady Wraybourne with some sharpness.

"Oh, well, you know how people talk. They say—I don't believe it, of course—but I've heard a

curious rumour, and really you know I shouldn't be altogether surprised if there wasn't something in it. It would account for the rather odd absence of Lady Harland."

"What in the world is there odd about that?" exclaimed Lady Wraybourne. "Great heavens, man and wife aren't chained together! Can't the poor man come to Hartley Harland by himself without giving rise to scandal?"

"I didn't mean to infer——" began Mr. Standish.

"It so happens I'm one of the few people who know the truth," went on Lady Wraybourne, without waiting for Mr. Standish to complete his obviously untruthful sentence. "There is a scandal and, as you've said so much, I won't keep it to myself."

"Oh, never do that!" cried Mrs. Standish, laughing.

"I don't, often, and in this case it's all to John Harland's credit, my John, I mean."

"Which one is that?" asked Miss Marchant.

"This one who's my neighbour now. His mother was my dearest friend and I've known him all his life."

"What's the scandal? About some one else?" asked Mr. Standish.

"Trust a man to ask," laughed Mrs. Standish.

"You were complaining a moment ago about Lady Harland," he protested.

"That's quite different."

"It's a very ordinary sort of scandal, really," said Lady Wraybourne, cutting in with decision, "except perhaps in the sequel. John Harland, the last one, I mean, had no morals as far as I ever discovered: he never married, but he ought to have been married more than once, if all's true. At any rate last autumn a few months after his death and just after John, my John Harland, had married, one of the ladies arrives upon the scene, boy and all. She didn't pretend she'd been married: the boy wasn't the lost claimant or anything of that kind. But she'd seen the announcement of my John's marriage, hadn't heard of her own rascal's death—he'd deserted her, I gathered, a couple of years back at least—and got the two mixed. She wanted money, of course."

"Blackmail," muttered Mr. Standish.

"I suppose so, but my sympathies are with her all the same. She'd been left stranded by that wretch, in Canada, of all places, and naturally she was playing what cards she had."

"And what did Sir John—your Sir John—do?" asked Miss Marchant with interest.

"Nothing to do with him," said Mr. Standish.

"Nothing," answered Lady Wraybourne, "and he might have taken that line, but if he had he wouldn't have been John."

"What did he do?" repeated Miss Marchant.

"He first investigated the business, and then when he had come to the conclusion that her story was genuine—and that's where the head of hair

comes in, the boy was a Harland all right, hair and all—he arranged a pension for her and appointed trustees to safeguard the boy's education."

"That was very generous of him," cried Miss Marchant.

"Quite characteristic at all events. There is a streak of generosity in John: I've noticed it before. He likes to understand, that's all. He told me all about it, as he wanted my advice. I don't at all know if he'd approve of my telling, but of course you won't say anything about it, will you, unless people tell it to you all wrong?"

"Of course not," declared they all.

Cecilia rose to her feet, slowly, dizzily. She felt as though, if she sat a moment longer, she must spring up and scream. She had heard, casually spoken of a few yards from her, a story all the inferences of which battered about her ears like winds at war. She was too bewildered to understand anything except that there had been no truth in anything she had understood before. She swayed and grasped desperately at her senses.

"Going upstairs, Cecilia?" she heard Lady Wraybourne's voice ask quietly.

The simple question helped her to restore herself to normality of behaviour, though not of thought. "Yes, please," she answered automatically, and was gone without another word.

CHAPTER XXVIII

UPSTAIRS once more Cecilia was alone with her reflections, and piercing indeed they were. She was brave enough to rejoice that the man she loved stood out now in all the splendour with which she had first invested him : he was in her heart for ever freed from all stain. But that was the only place in which he was. Impulsive little idiot that she now felt herself to have been, she had run out of his life without inquiry, and by so doing had given over the rest of her days to loneliness and misery. It was altogether impossible now to believe that he still loved her, was 'terribly in love,' in Lady Wraybourne's words : to believe that was indeed to let the longing father the faith. He knew why she had left him : by some means he had discovered the woman and boy, and all was therefore clear to him. That was much ; but he had shown it was not enough. Generous he might be, she was sure he was ; he might even forgive, but he could never forget. And she could not live tolerated because once he had loved her and gone through the marriage ceremony with her. Better a thousand times to be unacknowledged than that.

But she was letting her imagination run away with her, so she told herself with anger. Who had ever so much as breathed a suggestion of acknowledgment? He was 'satisfied': Lady Wraybourne had said so. How the word burnt itself in upon Cecilia, like a drop of acid! Satisfied with the present position, that was what he had meant to convey. He need have no qualms of uneasiness about the silly girl he had married; she was in safe hands, with his old friend, Lady Wraybourne, or passed on by her to other friends. He need not worry himself about her: she would not starve. Of course he was 'satisfied': was there ever a word in the whole range of human speech that had about it such a ring of inescapable doom?

Over and over in her head, as she had in the first days of her flight, did Cecilia turn her memory of her talk with the woman in the train. As she did so, she ceased to blame herself so harshly: she had not been so idiotic as she had instantly rushed into thinking. The evidence had been very strong, too strong at least for her reason though her heart had always held a doubt. Only one conclusion was possible, and in that there was little comfort, that Life was a dreadfully cruel and carnivorous beast, seeking whom it might devour and sparing none who were so hapless as to fall into its jaws. With throbbing head she lay down and with a dull ache in body and brain she awoke.

It had rained in the night, but the clouds were rolling away when she drew back the curtains, and as she dressed the children the sun broke gloriously out, flooding the nursery with gold. Through the open window drifted in the scent of the wet earth and all the songs of the busy birds. Felicity and Danny, bursting with health, skipped about more elusively than ever in the radiance of their youth; and Cecilia felt herself a spiritless, leaden-footed solitary in their company on such a morning.

She was getting them downstairs for their outing—never an easy or a swift process since Felicity liked to disappear round any corner or through any door that seemed to her roving fancy to invite her, and Danny was still firmly under the impression, in spite of repeated proofs to the contrary, that he could jump down the last three steps of any flight without tumbling—and had reached the side-hall when Lady Wraybourne called to her. She had hoped to escape into the open air unobserved, feeling very little able to support either scrutiny or conversation, but she could in no circumstances find it impossible to be pleased to see some one from whom she had never received anything but the kindest consideration; and the memory of Mrs. Standish's facile supposition rankled. She turned back therefore almost with eagerness, and before Lady Wraybourne could speak burst out,

“I'm glad you're alone. I do want to tell you Mrs. Standish is quite wrong!”

Lady Wraybourne's eyebrows went up humorously and she broke into smiles as she replied, "But of course she is, always has been ever since I've known her. Most people are. What's she wrong about this time?"

"I heard what she said to you last night," replied Cecilia, a little disconcerted, "before—before," she hesitated, stammering, and then concluded bravely, "before you talked of Hartley Harland, I mean."

"What did she say to me?"

"That I was glad to be leaving."

"Oh." Evidently Lady Wraybourne had hardly expected this: she looked puzzled a moment; then her face cleared and she said lightly, "Oh, well, she doesn't know everything, does she? As long as you and I understand one another, that's all that matters, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed."

"What I stopped you for," went on Lady Wraybourne, "was something quite different. Miss Marchant wants to see Hartley Harland, and Mr. and Mrs. Standish would like to go too. I suppose you won't be an angel and take them over for me? I've such a lot of letters to write, and John Harland's sure to keep us ages and make us stop to lunch."

Cecilia's heart thumped horribly: why were such dilemmas being perpetually thrust before her? But even at the cost of disobeying Lady Wraybourne this was a thing she could not do. Go to

Hartley Harland in charge of a party of visitors, and the day after she had learnt of John's guiltlessness—it was utterly beyond her. To go on any day when she might meet him there was an act that only dire necessity could have excused; she would have suffered tortures the whole visit lest he should misunderstand: but to go when chance word might reveal the conversation to which she had listened the previous evening, that could not be. Not to save her soul from damnation could she risk his being visited by the thought that the moment she had learnt the truth as to those two in the train, mother and son, she had flown to queen it at his old and lovely home. Utterly illogical the feeling might be, but it was at any rate an essential part of her, no more to be altered than her stature. If he had wished for her, knowing the reason she had fled, he had had his chance to show it: she might ask for his understanding, even for his forgiveness, but never for her own reinstatement. But how voice such a feeling? As the force of this and the impossibility of giving it expression rushed simultaneously upon her, she stared back at Lady Wraybourne with widening eyes of absolute dismay.

“Don't look so aghast, my dear,” she heard Lady Wraybourne say with a bantering air, after a silence that seemed an hour. “I see the prospect doesn't appeal to you: I forgot what a little recluse you've become.”

“I'm sorry,” stammered Cecilia.

"So'm I ; but it doesn't matter. My letters can wait, and it's probably just as well for me to go."

"Must either of us ?"

"I'm afraid so. They're shy of going by themselves. There's too much ceremony in this world altogether to my thinking. There, don't look so distressed."

"I hate refusing anything you ask."

"You hardly ever do. I'd no business to ask it. Don't give it another thought."

With a nod and a smile Lady Wraybourne limped energetically away. More spiritless than ever, Cecilia sought the children, who had gleefully taken advantage of the conversation to make their unaided way into the garden, Felicity leading, every inch of her suggestive of mischief, Danny stoutly following. They had completely disappeared by the time Cecilia emerged, and it took her some time to discover them. When she did, she was relieved: they had used the few minutes to fish in one of the rain-water barrels, oblivious to all but the imagined sport, and Felicity had wet sleeves and a stained coat and Danny was only less wet and stained because of his inability to reach over so far ; but they were alone. No John Harland was engaging their attention with an ease and humour to wring Cecilia's heart.

She scolded them well but without that sincerity which could alone penetrate into their consciences : they replied to her words with grins and invitations to her to fish likewise. Even when forcibly

removed from a continued attempt to overbalance and precipitate himself head first into the barrel, Danny's only reaction was to assert vehemently and without a vestige of accuracy that that was where 'a little gween f'og lived, all by hisself in the garden'. Felicity, never an imitator, adopted as her plan for the avoidance of censure of herself a sprightly, voluminous, and confidential account of all Danny's misdoings since he had arisen that morning. The account was hardly ended by the time both children had been reclothed and taken out again.

The adventure, both felt, was a thoroughly satisfactory beginning to the day's opportunities; and they kept Cecilia gratifyingly busy, both in body and brain, on coming out a second time. Even this did not tire either of them, and their resting times were so arranged with an artlessness of skill that at no hour were both quiet, and after luncheon both went quite wild. It is as impossible to say when babyhood changes into boyhood as to tell the moment when dawn becomes day: the one is different from the other, and with that each observer must be content. It seemed to Cecilia that afternoon that Danny, who up till then had been baby rather than boy, had made one of those startling leaps forward familiar to all students of childhood, and was suddenly more boy than baby. At any rate he refused for the first time to take his usual seat at luncheon in his high chair and insisted on an ordinary chair like Felicity's, he corrected

Cecilia when she used his customary version of 'mintin' for 'minute', and, when lunch was over, put two cushions on top of each other on the floor and began to run and jump like an athlete. Felicity, who had at first been rather supercilious and content to comment at intervals that 'Danny was a silly little boy who didn't know anything', became infected afresh with exuberance, and the nursery rang with screams as from a pair of jays. Then the two discovered a sheet of tissue paper which was apparently their hearts' desire: they fell upon it avidly, rent it in every direction and strewed the floor with its bits ecstatically, Danny crying, "We're feeding the dicky-birds, aren't we?"

Not merely were the screams and cries deafening in their shrill tirelessness but the nursery speedily looked as though a young earthquake had been in progress; nor would the children take any heed of Cecilia's half-laughing, half-exasperated adjurations to them to tidy up and get ready to go out again. She was pursuing an evasive Felicity, red-cheeked with excitement and agility, round the table to the accompaniment of clamour from all three when the door was unexpectedly opened and the butler appeared. His dignity was to some extent impaired by Felicity who, deserting the table, took instant cover behind him, and by Danny who gleefully squeezed between his feet, saying, 'Bridge under' the while; but he managed to make himself heard and to deliver his message, 'Mrs. Macfarlane had called and specially wished to see the children for

a moment. She couldn't wait long: could they be just brought down as they were?' The butler then fled, to avoid worse onslaughts, looking as soon as he was outside the nursery most dignified indeed.

The message was lacking in detail: Cecilia could not remember that she had ever heard of Mrs. Macfarlane. She supposed, however, that she must be some privileged friend either of Lady Wraybourne or of the children's parents. She hastily brushed the sobered children's hair, pulled their clothes into such respectability as could be managed at short notice and descended with them. There was no one in the drawing-room: she went accordingly to the main hall. Standing there in one of the windows was a small, old figure, in a short-waisted, bottle-green dress and an odd little poke bonnet, who turned with impatient quickness at the sound of the children's approach. With a start of dismay Cecilia recognized 'Aunt Emily.' There could be no doubt about it; the small, restless, eccentric figure was indelibly stamped upon her memory. She stood before her exactly as she had been at the wedding, in that moment when she had come up to her with such queer, such valuable generosity. In front of Cecilia was standing John's aunt, whose unexpected gift of money had made tolerable the first stages of her flight from John. Even as the memory flashed distinct across Cecilia's brain, she heard the very accents she so clearly recalled.

"These are Evelyn's children, are they? Look healthy enough, to be sure. And you're their governess, are you? You're very young, to be in charge of two children."

"Lady Wraybourne thought me old enough."

"Sarah would: she's very impulsive. And I didn't say you weren't old enough. I said you were very young. And so you are. Your face is familiar too: haven't I seen you before?"

"I can't say where," murmured Cecilia, dreadfully embarrassed.

"And I can't remember, but I'm sure I have or some one very like you."

At this moment, to the equal relief of Cecilia and the children, a diversion was effected by the sounds of a car drawing up at the front door. It proved to be Lady Wraybourne, who hurried in with even more than her usual indifference to her age and lameness, exclaiming, "How like you, Emily! Why didn't you come straight on to John's?"

"I wanted to have a look at Evelyn's children first," answered Aunt Emily.

"And you have," replied Lady Wraybourne, glancing keenly at the children, at Cecilia, and at her odd visitor.

"And I've seen that young lady before," persisted Aunt Emily, nodding her bonnet energetically in Cecilia's direction. "My memory's as good as ever it was, but it's not as obedient as I should like."

"I wish I could say the same," answered Lady Wraybourne diplomatically. "And what d'you think of these two little rascals?"

But Aunt Emily was not to be diverted from her line of thought. She had kept a promise made to the children's grandmother, seen them, observed that they were well and happy, and dismissed them from her notice; her own memory was much more interesting.

"She's very like some one I've seen," she persisted. It was not for some minutes that Lady Wraybourne could get from her her plans. Then she explained that she was motoring to stay with some friends near Whitby, had undertaken to look in at Darlingby and supposed she would have to stop for a cup of tea at Hartley Harland.

"That's it," she cried then, smiling with pleasure. "John's wife! That's the girl she reminds me of. I told you I've a good memory, and so I have."

"Excellent," murmured Lady Wraybourne whilst Cecilia by attention to the children struggled desperately to hide her confusion. The attention fortunately was necessary and not merely pretence: Felicity and Danny, finding the visit of a strange, old, and indifferent lady boring and the hall devoid of excitement, were creating interest for themselves by quarrelling heatedly about nothing at all. Cecilia was not able to listen to Aunt Emily until she had separated and quieted them and then the first words she heard were,

"Sarah, there's something wrong there."

"My dear Emily," rejoined Lady Wraybourne with some impatience, "I assure you there's no ground for any such idea."

"It's no use," replied Aunt Emily obstinately. "I know there is. I don't say she's bad; she's flighty, not the sort of girl at all that John ought to have married."

"Have you seen her?"

"At the wedding, that's all."

"Then how can you be so positive?"

"I like being positive. Besides, you agree with me, you know you do."

"I really don't."

"Why not?"

"I know what John's told me."

"Told you," repeated Aunt Emily triumphantly.

"John's proud and'll say anything. Is she with him at Hartley Harland?"

"No, but that means nothing."

"Ah, but when has she been with him? That's what I can't find out. He's told you this and he's told you that, but what opportunities have you had for judging for yourself?"

"Well——" began Lady Wraybourne hesitatingly.

"No, no, Sarah," went on Aunt Emily without waiting for an answer, "I'll believe in her when I see her doing her duty and not before. She's obviously off enjoying herself like all these girls of to-day, and John won't admit it. And what about the future, that's what I want to know?"

"The future?" repeated Lady Wraybourne.

"Yes, yes," rejoined Aunt Emily with sharpness.

"John's not one of these selfish, modern young men who put their comfort before their families. He's a Harland and wants Harlands after him—as I do."

"It's early days yet, Emily."

"It's never too early, Sarah. And I'm getting old. If she goes gadding about by herself, well, all I can say is that's not his choice. He's a passion for children and he's just the man who ought to have them."

Felicity could be restrained no longer. "I want my baby doll!" she burst out with that suddenness of desire that is so all-sweeping. Danny, on the other hand, who had been practising odd little sounds in his throat, now made his contribution in a fat, satisfied voice, "I could say 'um' when I laugh, couldn't I?"

Cecilia had stood rooted to the hall-floor, aching with pain, every nerve jarred, but unable to drag herself out of sound. She was stabbed to the heart: it was borne in upon her with a terrible swiftness that not once, either at the time of her flight or after, had she really thought of the situation she had created, as it must have been to John. She had left him stranded, married yet without a wife. With a gasp, she seized upon the silence momentarily caused by the children's interruptions and telling both to say 'good bye' hustled them towards Aunt Emily, intending instantly to remove herself and them into the security of the fields. As she did so,

the front door was opened and Mrs. Standish walked in, followed first by John Harland and then, at an interval, by Miss Marchant and Mr. Standish.

Cecilia, turning hastily at the sound, saw John's head appearing behind Mrs. Standish, saw his eyes directed first to her and then dart from her to Aunt Emily, on again to Lady Wraybourne and thence back to her all in a flash, saw an expression of relief leap across his face, she presumed at the tranquillity denoting the secret still preserved, saw finally the well-remembered look of humour take possession of him once more. Before she could do more than note his greeting, before she could in the least decide on flight, he strode in in a masterful manner, and, seizing Aunt Emily's two hands in his own, cried, "So this is why Lady Wraybourne left us so suddenly! I might have guessed there was more in that telephone message than met the eye."

"I heard Emily was here, waiting," explained Lady Wraybourne, "so naturally I rushed."

"Naturally," he replied, squeezing Aunt Emily's hands affectionately.


"You can't humbug me, John!" cried the old lady, much pleased. "I know you. You're up to mischief as plain as anything."

John, with a lightning glance at Cecilia, put on an air of the utmost innocence as he answered, smiling, "And what have I done now?"

Cecilia's ears were already tingling in anticipa-

tion of the inevitable inquiry as to his wife, when a most welcome diversion was caused by Danny who, gazing at John with the wide, blue eyes of a fellow-conspirator, cried delightedly, "Hullo, you ugly daddy!"

To his further gratification this sally was hailed with more laughter than rebuke. He was not, however, left long to enjoy it. Under cover of the merriment Cecilia seized on him, signalled to Felicity to follow, and fled. Fortunately Felicity was wearied of grown-ups and indoors: she obeyed immediately, and Cecilia, her heart thumping both with relief and agitation, was in a few more minutes out of the garden and alone with the two children and her own recognition of distress.



CHAPTER XXIX

IT was apparent that John Harland's humorous ingenuity had proved adequate to fence successfully even with the suspicious questioning of Aunt Emily. When Cecilia, rallying her nerves resolutely against the series of shocks they had successively sustained, descended with the courage of desperation to the drawing-room for dinner she found courage superfluous. All was as usual. Aunt Emily had passed on her way leaving no eddies of inquiry behind her, and John did not appear. Lady Wraybourne treated Cecilia with a friendliness that knew no diminution, Mr. and Mrs. Standish were agreeably and simply loquacious, Miss Marchant was impersonally interesting. The evening produced no qualms and was without incident.

The next day and the next were tranquil also : almost it seemed as though John either had grown tired of his sport or had felt that he had been needlessly challenging discovery. At all events he did not come to Darlingby, nor was suggestion made of a further visit to Hartley Harland. Mr. and Mrs. Standish departed to pay another visit, Miss Marchant returned to London : life at Darlingby resumed its former, completely uneventful

course. Cecilia, in spite of Lady Wraybourne's supposition, had previously not found that dull : now, in spite of what she had asserted, it seemed to her a succession of wearisome, unprofitable hours, the burden of which nothing, not even the gaiety of the children, could assuage.

On the third day Lady Wraybourne commented aloud upon her lack of spirit. "I've come to the conclusion," she said, coming abruptly out of her boudoir as the children chattered and clattered downstairs, Cecilia in their wake, "that you think me very stupid."

"Lady Wraybourne, what do you mean?"

"You told me it wasn't dull up here, whereas I know perfectly well it is—that was before you decided to leave. I was certain you'd be bored, and you were certain you wouldn't be, and as a result you've been at it without any sort of rest or change. That won't do, and in any case we mustn't let these monkeys get too dependent upon you. This afternoon I'll take them for a run in the car and you go for a walk."

"Hurrah!" shouted Felicity, racing on to relieve her exuberance.

"I'm going in the car to-morrow, aren't I?" echoed Danny, following with the air of one to whom all Time was the same.

"Have you been to the falls at Glissondale yet?"

Cecilia shook her head : she did not like to admit that she not only had been nowhere except once,

disastrously, to Hartley Harland but had had no wish to go anywhere.

"My dear, how unenterprising of you! It's a lovely expedition, especially in spring. I command you to take sandwiches and go immediately and don't be back till dark."

Cecilia assented meekly and in less than an hour was on the road and glad of her obedience. Lady Wraybourne was right: she had been at her simple tasks too unremittingly to be able to shake off depression, and the views that opened out before her were full of loveliness and changing lights. Insensibly her spirits rose: whatever humanity might be, Nature was kindly, and in these dales she was alone with her comforter except for the very occasional passing of a car.

At first the road was winding, but after she had walked about an hour she entered upon a long sweep of enfolding hills where the road ran onward and slightly downward in a great curve. No house, no person was in sight as she set foot upon it. She walked on, sufficiently conscious of the activity that these many quiet weeks had abundantly restored to her to be grateful for the gift of health, whatever happiness Life held. Her short, quick steps carried her springily to about the middle of the curve where she was the one moving thing in all the sweep of landscape: then a powerful car came swiftly up the long slope from the valley towards which she was tending. For twenty minutes at least Cecilia had had the whole world

to herself, and she felt revived as much by the experience as by the clean, fresh breeze that had whipped her cheeks to roses. She had been thinking that whatever befell her she would be poor-spirited to despair: she had lost much but she had also had much, and of this some was treasure unstealable. She had been resolving that before she left Darlingby and plunged once more into the unknown she would take the first opportunity she had to tell John that she wanted to apologize for having ever doubted his honour: so much she owed both to him and to her own self-respect. Picturing the moment, she thought of herself as saying just that and nothing more and turning away: but her imagination would not be so truncated, and as she walked she heard in her mind's ear his eager, generous response. As a consequence her eyes were shining and a glory, of which she was wholly unaware, was softly upon her face. She stepped to one side as the big car sped towards her, her eyes roaming past it to the quiet hills: in a second she would be alone with them once more.

To her momentary vexation there was a grinding of brakes and the crunch of wheels arrested: strangers who wished to ask the way. They would break into the happiness to which her thoughts had brought her, but they would be gone again in a moment; she must not be churlish. With a smile renewed Cecilia turned her eyes upon the two occupants of the car. Then of a sudden her smile

was stolen from her : to imagine a conversation taking place at some undefined future and at one's own choosing is one thing ; to find it thrust upon one immediately and without power of avoidance is wholly another. Descending from the seat beside the driver, his gaze upon her, was John Harland.

He had a look she had never seen, a blend of consternation and of fun, a look so comical that it almost swept away from Cecilia the swift flood of her embarrassment. What was in his mind ? Something, it seemed, had happened, that even he, the ever-ready, was not instantly prepared to meet.

He sprang with nimbleness from the car and came hurrying towards her : almost unbelievable to Cecilia's understanding were the first words of his greeting, cheerily called out,

"Hullo, darling ! You've got farther than I expected !"

Cecilia felt the world spin round her : she opened her lips to answer, but could frame no words. The next moment John was close to her : under his breath he said hurriedly, with a backward gesture of his head, "Uncle George. In the car there. Spotted you and insisted on stopping. Awfully sorry."

Cecilia looked at him, a straight exchange of glance : he was concerned, but he was also terribly amused. For a flash of thought she was enraged, just long enough for a fresh leap of colour to her cheeks : then, with equal suddenness, humour came

to her rescue. It was bitter, yes, without a doubt, salty to the spirit, but it had its humorous side.

"Thanks," she said softly to John: then she went past him boldly. Out of the car had now clambered the driver, the big, gaunt, old man, with the Harland hair, unmistakable for all his years, showing in his short beard and beneath his cap, who had introduced himself to her as her new uncle at the wedding. "Well met, Uncle George," she said, taking refuge in the width of her ignorance in the phrase John had recently addressed to her.

"Eh, but you're looking bonny," he remarked, shaking hands warmly and looking keenly at her. "Marriage agrees with you, evidently, in spite of the gossips."

"Have you ever known gossip true?" queried John Harland lightly from behind her. "Ours is a regular runaway match, isn't it, Cecilia?"

"An admirable description," she replied stoutly.

"You're not a bad walker," remarked Uncle George. "It must be the best part of ten miles you've come."

"Hardly," she answered, "and, any way, it's a good day."

"Splendid," agreed John.

"Well, you'll not be walking home, that's certain," said Uncle George. "Jump in."

"But——" began Cecilia, greatly taken aback.

"No 'buts' now: I'll take no denial. This husband of yours was for passing you by, declared you'd vowed to do your twenty-five miles to-day

if you died for it and that nothing'd stop you, not even your uncle. But, by Gad, I've had fifty years' more practice at being obstinate than you have, and if I don't have my way, I'll never set foot in Hartley Harland again, and you won't like that, you know you won't!"

"I—I can't risk that," she murmured, looking at John for support but getting none. He had tried to rescue her and failed: now he was no longer challenging but enjoying the situation.

"Of course you can't. Besides, you're my niece, ain't you? I'm on my way to Scotland and I must lunch somewhere. I wasn't coming this way, but I ran into John last night in York and so I brought him along."

"I didn't want to come, either," put in John, "and I've told him we're not ready for visitors yet; but he doesn't care."

"Jump in!" commanded Uncle George imperiously. Cecilia still tried evasion, but he would have none of it. He cut her excuses short and bundled her in without ceremony. In another minute, too embarrassed even to think, she was on her way a second time to Hartley Harland. Her fate was out of her own hands: she could only float on the tide.

After they had gone some way John leant back and said to her, "I've told Uncle George we're still only picnicking. We haven't," he added to his uncle, "reopened the house again yet."

"No matter," muttered Uncle George; "I'll not be staying. But it's time you did."

"Yes, but there's the deuce of a lot to see to and settle first."

Cecilia sank back among the cushions, wondering at the strangeness that had enveloped her, remembering most of all John's 'awfully sorry,' and that he had been for passing her by. In sympathy or in distaste? Ah, which? There was all the world between the two. She had come to no conclusion when the car turned past a lodge into a long avenue of trees and, sweeping rapidly up the rise, swung to that side of the long, low, many-gabled house that she had never seen. Hartley Harland from the west! More stately, more eloquent than from the terraces and garden—and all unknown to her now revisiting it as its presumed mistress: the humour was bitter indeed.

The instant the car came to a standstill John leapt out, ran up the curved flight of steps, and, opening the massive, old, nail-studded, oak door, disappeared within. Uncle George leant back in his seat and looked up with great contentment at the rooks cawing lustily in the tall trees near.

"Wonderful old place," he remarked half to himself. "Gad, how that sound takes me back!"

Reminiscence was to be prized; it could be used to avert questioning, thought Cecilia very inaccurately. Aloud she said, "Were you here much as a boy, Uncle George?"

"Knew every stick and stone of it," he rejoined, "and do still. That's why I didn't mean to come till I ran into John."

"I should have thought——" she began.

"—that that would have brought me over any way?" he finished for her. "Yes, but that's just it. I'm too fond of the place. Look at that window! Perfect! Best bit of Elizabethan work in the county, and it's all like that. I haven't been able to come near it for ages. First, that rotten young fool, and then you."

"I beg your pardon!" exclaimed Cecilia indignantly.

"That's all right," rejoined Uncle George, grinning. "I'd only seen you at the wedding and that doesn't count. Every one's an angel at the altar. What have you been up to?"

"I'm sure I've no idea——"

"Emily said you hadn't been here, not to Hartley Harland! That was queer, that meant something. You are here, so she's wrong for once. And you're better looking than ever, better than any one's any right to be in these immoral days——"

At this point, to Cecilia's relief, John reappeared in the great doorway, together with a stocky, pleasant-faced man-servant whom he instantly introduced. "You remember Curtis, Uncle George? With me all through the war. He and his wife are looking after us just whilst we're here this time, and very well too, aren't they, Cecilia?"

Cecilia nodded, speechlessly grateful both for his resource and for the perfectly unsurprised look with which Curtis received her, a splendour of respectful intelligence that spoke volumes for his faith in his

master. Somehow John was contriving to carry off a situation that had seemed to her vaguely incredible as she was being whirled resistlessly towards it. But search him as she would whenever his eyes were not upon her she could not distinguish whether his attitude towards her was based on mockery or on respect. Was he preserving her credit or indulging his sense of revenge?

She got out of the car, followed by Uncle George, and went up the steps. Even in that intensely difficult moment she could recognize in wonder that she was setting foot in her husband's great, old home for the first time. Uncle George was talking away beside her, but she hardly heard him: her eyes were given in part to John, in part to Hartley Harland.

"Why in the world aren't you keeping open house here yet?" she was forced to hear Uncle George ask as they entered the big hall.

"Only three months married," John said gaily in answer: "plenty of time yet."

She let the two men talk: she stood and looked round her, trying to observe whilst seeming to be at home. The hall was panelled in oak and facing her was a huge stone fireplace, with ingle-nooks, old scroll-work, and quaintly chased fire-dogs on which big logs smouldered: the Harland arms were carved above it. On the walls on each side, severe in armour, debonair in lace, generations of her husband's ancestors looked down upon the comedy of her appearance amongst them. Kind faces,

severe and sarcastic faces, mostly of men with here and there a dame powdered, beflounced, stiff in farthingale or graceful in crinoline. It oppressed her, this hall that had seen so much : in other circumstances it might have smiled a welcome. She moved uneasily, and heard John immediately say, "Come into the little smoking-room : it's cosier there."

"I'll just wash my hands," exclaimed Uncle George, "and then lunch."

"You know your way," said John smiling.

"I do, my boy, but no secrets with this young woman behind my back. You come with me."

John could not but assent. He gave Cecilia as he passed a cautioning glance, running his hand across his lips in a way seemingly casual but full of significance to her, and she was left alone. Uncle George might know his way ; she assuredly did not. She was standing wondering which could be the 'little smoking-room', when Curtis reappeared. He went at once across the hall to a door beneath the great curve of the wide stone stairs. "This way, my lady," he said quietly.

Cecilia gave him a keen look : his face as he opened the door for her expressed nothing. "Thank you, Curtis," she said simply.

"It's a pleasure, my lady," he replied : "the dining-room's there." He pointed down the hall and went in the direction indicated himself.

John hurried back through the hall : seeing Cecilia standing irresolutely, he broke into a quiet

chuckle and remarked casually, "The dear old boy's an admiral, that's to say one of the most obstinate set of men on earth: what he wants to do he does, and what he wants to believe he believes. Pure waste of time trying to argue with him, only makes him worse."

"Or you wouldn't have let him bring me here," she queried instantly.

"I imagine," he answered very quietly, "that it's a visit that gives more pleasure to me than to you."

"John——" she began with nervous earnestness. But further opportunity for private speech was denied her. Uncle George's voice broke in upon them, calling the same word.

"John!" called Uncle George. "Where have you got to? 'Pon my word, I'm glad to live in a cottage: no hiding-places there."

He stumped in upon them, rubbing his hands. "Ah, there you are! And now what about a bit of lunch?"

"It'll be ready in one minute, Sir George," said Curtis's respectful tones.

"Good, good. And I expect you'll be all the better for it too, young woman. You ought to be hungry even if you aren't. No food, no children, that's as good a motto as most, eh? And now I want to hear all about it. Fire away."

"There's nothing to tell," stammered Cecilia.

"Rubbish, that won't do for me. I haven't come all these miles out of my way for that. Emily will

have it there's something wrong : now let's have it straight, is there ? ”

“ Do you take your opinions from Aunt Emily, Uncle George, or do you form your own ? ” inquired John innocently.

“ Damn it,” exploded Uncle George, “ what d'you mean ? I don't take my opinions from any one. All the same Emily's a wonderful nose, quite the best in the family.”

“ No, no,” cried John, “ I can't agree to that. Cecilia's is, easily.”

“ I'm speaking of scent, not shape,” retorted Uncle George testily. “ Cecilia's is her one weak point, too small entirely. But that's not the point. Out with it.”

“ You said yourself,” said Cecilia bravely, “ that marriage evidently agreed with me.”

“ With you, yes, but what about John ? There's a something about him I don't——”

Uncle George's doubts were cut short by Curtis's announcement of lunch : he broke off and turned down the hall towards the dining-room with the frank eagerness of a man with hunger and a healthy digestion. Cecilia's eyes met John's appealingly : to sit through lunch undergoing inquisition was impossible. Before she could act he was at her side.

“ Clear out,” he whispered. “ I'm a better liar alone.”

“ Come on, Cecilia,” boomed Uncle George from the dining-room door. “ I'm hungry.”


"I—I—I'm not very well," she stammered. "I'm feeling rather sick. Begin without me."

A sly grin of genial understanding came unexpectedly to wreath the old sailor's face, replacing his impatience. He came forward again and patted Cecilia's shoulder. "Good girl," he said. "That's the best bit of news I've heard this year. That's what the old place wants. Take care of yourself: don't mind me. By Gad," he added, turning to John with a chuckle, "if that isn't one in the eye for Emily——" He ended in a laugh that rumbled itself genially into silence.

Cecilia, her cheeks flaming, made for the nearest door. Her eyes, drawn involuntarily, irresistibly, met John's: to her relief and indignation his were dancing with suppressed glee. Then she ran. She found herself in the great darkened drawing-room where the furniture grimaced at her in queer, draped shapes. A streak of light penetrated through the shutters and drew her instantly: in another minute she had wrenched one open, letting in a golden shaft, opened the window and, sliding herself dexterously out, jumped down on to the flagged path that ran along outside. She was now on the side of the house where she had been on her previous visit, and her way lay remembered before her. As before, she fled away, down the terraces, across the garden and the great field until she was a second time in the shelter of the rising wood. There, among the first few primroses under the swollen

buds, she flung herself down on a fallen log to rest and regain her breath.

Presently she took out the sandwiches with which she had been provided and began her lunch. Thinking of the lunch she had deserted, remembering John's words and look, first, his 'awfully sorry,' then his imagining that the visit gave him more pleasure than her, then his whispered 'clear out' and finally his gleeful acceptance of Uncle George's misconception, all of a sudden and almost unaware, she laughed quietly aloud, to the indignant surprise of an inquisitive robin, and then, equally suddenly, burst into tears.



CHAPTER XXX

CECILIA did not hurry back to Darlingby. She stayed sitting on the log in the wood, turning over in her mind all that had befallen her, until she was reminded by a premonitory shiver that she was in danger of catching cold. That brought back to her with a rush the almost obliterated misery of her last evening with the Laskers : till then she had remained divided between laughter and tears, but at that recollection she was splashed through and through by a wave of thankfulness. She sprang up and regained warmth fully by an energetic search for primroses, not yet in fragrant abundance but star-scattered through the wood, and the picking of a small bunch : and then sauntered by a circuitous route home to Darlingby, stopping often, her whole being in a curious maze, tended by the peaceful music of the birds' songs and the quick oncoming of the dusk.

She regained the nursery without meeting any one to find a mild riot in progress. An indulgent, weak Agnes had given both children their bath together and was now being openly defied : two rosy-cheeked, vociferous rogues were careering about in dressing-gowns, pretending to be wild horses and

taking no notice at all of her pathetic persuasions to them to have their teeth cleaned and go quietly to bed. Cecilia's return was greeted by Agnes with a sigh of deep relief, by the children with wild neighs of welcome : she took charge with amused sternness and in a short while silence was in the ascendant.

She went down to dinner prepared to cope evasively with the questions she would probably be asked as to Glissondale Falls, but beyond a hope that she was not too tired with her walk and had enjoyed her day Lady Wraybourne made no reference to her absence. She smelt the primroses with which Cecilia had presented her with great satisfaction, remarking, "Delicious things. They're early for up here, but it's been an exceptionally mild spring, and I keep forgetting how Time's moving on."

"Very fast," sighed Cecilia : she did not like to remind Lady Wraybourne of her promise to find her another place ; the necessity made her heart sink.

"Felicity was asking to-day," went on Lady Wraybourne, "if she couldn't have a picking expedition : that child adores flowers."

"And has an astonishing zest for any novelty."

"I think we might gratify this ; what d'you think ? If it's fine to-morrow, I'll take you all in the car to a sheltered spot I know, where there are sure to be primroses out."

Cecilia assented gladly : she had been all too little,

she felt, in Lady Wraybourne's company, and soon she would see her no more. She knew she ought to be taking steps herself as to a new situation, but could not mentally face up to her departure as an actuality of the near future.

The next day was obligingly one of the warmest, most windless days the year had yet brought forth. From the way the children behaved on being first told of the little plan, a stranger might have surmised that a trip at least to Mars was projected: they flew about rapturously, chattering like starlings; every detail, all possibilities were canvassed, debated, arranged, and rearranged several scores of times before, after an early lunch, they set out. Cecilia, watching the way intently, noted with mixed feelings that they soon turned off from the road to Hartley Harland.

"That's the wood," said Lady Wraybourne, pointing ahead to a sheltered corner of the valley through which they were passing after they had gone several miles. "That's always the earliest place."

"There's some one there," said Cecilia, disappointed.

"Car!" cried Danny, wriggling on her knee and pointing.

"That'll only be John Harland," explained Lady Wraybourne. "He's seen very little of the children really, so I suggested his joining us if he cared to, and he said he'd be delighted."

"Hardly an ordinary man's afternoon," mur-

mured Cecilia, her heart pounding so wildly that she felt she must say something to cover her tumult.

"No, but John's not an ordinary man, and if he gets bored he can always talk to me."

John Harland was sitting in a two-seater drawn up by the side of the road in front of a gate opening on to a grass path up the wood. He waved cheerily to them as they approached, swept Cecilia with a half-defiant smile, and then, jumping out, lifted the ecstatic Danny from her arms and set him down on the road. Then he caught Felicity just as she was stumbling in her hurrying excitement, swung her out, and, turning, gave an arm to Lady Wraybourne.

"Capital!" he cried. "Baskets, wood, sunshine, and smiles—anything wanting?"

Cecilia, hardly knowing whether to respond or be silent, so swiftly had the character of the afternoon's outing been transformed, sprang out and, in self-defence, followed the laughing, calling children into the wood. Her face was on fire: the sooner she gave a natural reason for her colour by stooping over primroses, the better.

"Luminous with love

In tranquil clusters, breathing fragrance forth
Throughout the woodland, lighting up the gloom
Of the leaf-sodden pathways,"

the exquisite little flowers were shyly stealing out to reward the zealous seeker. John stayed, Cecilia noted as she ran ahead with the children, to help Lady Wraybourne who came limping stoutly along.

But presently Cecilia heard the old lady bid him ignore her: she could manage, she declared. Felicity called imperiously to him to come and help her and, with a second half-defiant smile at Cecilia, he obeyed.

Cecilia did not mind: he was near her and that was enough for her happiness, as much as was ever to be hers. And conversation was in any event impossible. Felicity, though a picker, was not content for a moment to pick in unadmired silence: some one was needed every second either to reach her a special flower awkwardly growing near bramble or nettle or to respond to her eager, "look what I've found!" Danny considered picking flowers a very inferior sport, suitable only for girls and grown-ups.

"I'm a big boy, aren't I?" he declared, clambering over a bit of broken branch.

"If you're a big boy, what am I?" asked John laughing.

"You're a big boy too," admitted Danny. "Those lalies," he added, waving a fat hand towards Cecilia and Felicity, "are only little girls."

"Quite right," assented John heartily.

"They're just chujunes," explained Danny condescendingly.

"That's beyond me," remarked John; "a wonderful word."

"Oh, you'll never pass the language exam!" cried Cecilia. "How would you translate 'juthers,' for instance?"

"In what connexion?"

"They must take care or they'll hurt their juthers."

"Their—what?" he exclaimed, laughing.

"Each other. Euphony à la Felicity. Just as Danny says 'a paper-fly' for potato-pie."

"I see. And what are chujunes?"

"Children, of course," interpreted Cecilia, speaking with a gaiety that surprised herself. The whole scene was going to her head: she felt as though in another moment she must break, like the birds, into song.

"Children?" queried John. "Good: Danny, you're right again."

"Danny's a very silly little boy," called Felicity severely: she did not at all approve either of Danny's condescension or of the praise that he was undeservedly receiving for it.

Praise or blame, it was all one to Danny. His mind, sufficient unto itself, had passed beyond words to something much more interesting. In front of him, at the side of the path and free of the brambles that irked his manhood, was a section of the trunk of a tree, cut but not yet removed by the woodmen. To this Lady Wraybourne was stubbornly making her way, and for once age and youth agreed: it was also the goal of Danny's desire. He was at it first and with great puffings and struggles climbed up on to it and then scrambled erect.

"I couldn't fall, could I?" he announced, tottering dangerously.

"Very easily, I imagine," answered John.

"He's an awful tease, isn't he?" remarked Lady Wraybourne, directing her words at Felicity.

"He's a good tease," was Felicity's unexpected reply.

"I love 'Cilia, don't I?" called Danny irrelevantly, dancing on the tree.

"We all do," said Lady Wraybourne.

"D'you love 'Cilia?" immediately inquired Felicity of John.

"Of course I love 'Cilia, don't I?" he responded without an instant's hesitation, making his tone a remarkably exact imitation of Danny's slow, fat, satisfied voice.

Cecilia knew that her colour was sweeping again in an inconvenient flow to her cheeks, but she shot him a glance nonetheless: she felt that at whatever cost of embarrassment to herself she must know whether he was all mockery or in any degree, however slight, touched with sincerity. But he met her glance so squarely that he conceded nothing: she was forced back to her picking, still tingling in every nerve with the thrill of uncertainty, yet telling herself that it was utterly impossible that he could have so spoken in sheer malicious unkindness.

"I wonder you care to spend your time like this," she said when the chances of picking brought them once for a short space alone together.

"Do you?" he queried instantly with a keen look at her averted face. "To me an afternoon like this is a direct proof of the existence of God."

“Oh!” she cried, all her being stirred by such an answer: her breath came and went unevenly and she did not dare look up. —

The next moment he had taken from his answer all personal application. “Yes,” he went on lightly. “Who but a God would mould the tiny flower To its mere beauty? as one of our poets asks.” To this she had no reply and, the children calling each severally and insistently, the conversation died.

Presently all the baskets were filling up and the children were growing tired: by mutual consent the pickers gathered by Lady Wraybourne sitting on the tree-trunk.

“Tell me a ’tawly,” began Danny to his world at large.

“Sing me a song,” demanded Felicity, always contrary on principle.

“Your show,” said John to Cecilia, keeping Danny from falling backwards and squeezing down friendlily beside her.

Once more her undisciplined heart began to thump: she took refuge in obedience and began a nursery favourite:

“Cows and horses walk on four legs:
Little children walk on two legs:
Birds fly up into the air:
Fishes swim in the water clear.
One, two, three, four, five,
Once I caught a fish alive:
Why did you let it go?—”

"Why, indeed?" interrupted John.

"Because it bit my finger so,"

chanted Felicity, continuing the song in answer.

"Or because I bit it?" he asked.

But Felicity at once made his ignorance plain. "That doesn't make sense," she said with decisive superiority.

"Perhaps not. Any way, a good song," he then admitted, and there was an odd little quaver in his voice as though Cecilia's clear, young notes or some chord of memory had proved unexpectedly moving. He darted a look at her that was more suggestive of feeling than any he had yet allowed himself and added, "My favourite is this; it has such a jolly sort of invitation in it somehow:

Warm, hands, warm;
The men have gone to plough:
If you want to warm your hands,
Warm your hands now!"

"There isn't always a fire," said Felicity firmly, with the unexpected matter-of-factness of a child.

"That's true," agreed Cecilia.

"We could always pretend there was, though," added Felicity with brightness.

"Pretence ones aren't very warm," said Cecilia sadly: her heart seemed to her to be in her throat, fluttering like a frightened bird in a chimney. To be so close to him, and yet so far away, was undermining all her self-control; and to screen her weakness her voice was cold.

"That is so, of course," John agreed with great politeness, and rose at once from his seat beside her on the trunk.

She got up too, and looked at him. She could not speak; she had said too much already and, if he were so quick to take her words wrongly, could she help it? She had spoken out of the essential loneliness of her life, and he had thought himself snubbed. Their eyes met, but he also did not speak. He searched her with his glance intently, and then very quietly turned to Lady Wraybourne.

"Time I was moving," he said.

"Have you picked enough?" she asked.

"One never does that," he answered.

"Tea-time!" shouted Danny, sliding off the trunk with an ominous sound suggestive of serious injury to his knickers.

"I simply must get one more teeny bunch!" cried Felicity, darting at an isolated primrose as a thrush darts at a worm.

"The most intriguing word in the dictionary," murmured John as though to himself with a lightning side-glance to note if Cecilia heard him.

"What is?" she asked, uninterested.

"The word 'simply'," he replied. "Think how much it can mean, sometimes. Supposing you said, 'I'm staying here to pick primroses' that sounds fairly clear, but if you said 'I'm staying here simply to pick them'—you see the difference?"

"Not quite."

"The latter obviously would mean you were not

in the least influenced by anything but the flowers, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"But it would, surely? No supposing about it? Take another example. Imagine your saying, 'I am sending this back because I didn't think it right to keep it', you might have heaps of reasons; but if you say, 'I am sending this back simply because'—isn't it different or am I wrong? Do tell me how you use the word!"

He spoke so eagerly, with such significant intent, fastening his eyes so keenly upon her as they followed slowly down the path after the children and in front of Lady Wraybourne, that Cecilia could not but realize that he was putting to her no ordinary or casual question. She delved into her memory fervently: in a flash came the key—the message she had pinned to the sable coat she had returned to him, 'I am sending this back simply': the words he was quoting to her now. She stammered, trying to frame an answer but finding all language inadequate, inconclusive.

"Tell me," he repeated with an earnestness far removed from all his bantering; "isn't it different?"

"It is different, yes, very different," she said slowly.

"I thought so," he rejoined quickly, in a tone of deep feeling.

Cecilia glanced around her: for a moment or two she was quite alone with John. The opportunity she had sought was hers; she would be

lacking in courage and in candour if she failed to take it. She spoke hurriedly with rising colour and eyes on the ground, "John—there's one thing I want to say to you."

She stopped, but he gave no sign of wanting to prevent her continuing: she regained strength and went on,

"I know now what I ought to have known always, that I was wrong in thinking that that woman—you know who I mean?——"

He nodded, lips pressed together.

"—was referring to you. I'm sorry."

"Thank you," he answered.

"I feel I was pretty hasty—and selfish," she added diffidently.

"That's all right," he replied with great cheerfulness, and was silent.

She waited for him to say something more: as he did not, silence gathered heavily upon her also. She lifted her eyes and the next instant, dropping her basket, she started forward with a cry and ran as she had never run in her life. They were near the gate out of the wood on to the road: they had left that open, the two cars drawn up a few yards to one side. Danny, forgotten by the grown-ups and ignored by Felicity, had gone gambolling ahead down the path: he was now tripping gaily through the gate, and, travelling up the road at a great pace towards him, was a big touring car. Danny was screened from the driver's view by the waiting cars, and to Cecilia, in a swift agony of anticipation, a

horrible accident seemed inevitable. She swooped forward on wings of terror, and tearing down the little slope caught Danny in her arms as he capered out on to the edge of the road and, unable to check her impetus, did the only thing possible and sprang with all her strength onwards and across in front of the big, fast-travelling car. The driver of that with a shout and a sudden wrenching of his wheel just succeeded in turning in enough to let her pass, then, seeing that she and her charge were all right, waved a hand with the cheerfulness of his race, put on more pace to avoid all questions, and disappeared.

Cecilia had had no time to estimate what had happened or to realize that both she and Danny were uninjured when a tense, white-faced John was upon her.

"Good God!" he cried. "You might have been killed!"

"Well?" she flamed at him with sudden passion.

"Well?" he repeated, staring at her strangely.

"I thought Danny was——"

"Danny was all right," he broke in with curt-ness: "the driver could have missed him easily; he had all his work cut out to miss you!"

"He was clever," she answered with a trembling lip. "No one else much misses me."

He looked at her a moment steadily without answering: then he said very quietly, "I wouldn't go quite so far as that."

"You would! You have—quite as far!" she cried.

"We jumped 'cross the road, didn't we?" called Danny in his fattest and most satisfied voice to Felicity and Lady Wraybourne who had now reached the gate.

"A happy ending to a jolly afternoon," John remarked, turning to Lady Wraybourne. "A gallant rescue and no harm done." He briefly described the incident.

"My dear," said Lady Wraybourne with real affection, "you'll make my hair white."

"It is white, Grannibel," volunteered Felicity cheerfully.

Lady Wraybourne laughed, gave Cecilia her hand, and abandoned sentiment. "You'll come back to tea, John?" she asked, as she settled in her seat and the children clambered, talkatively, in.

"I think not, thanks. Sufficient for the day, you know. I've several things to see to if I'm to get off to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" queried Lady Wraybourne, as Cecilia, about to get in beside her, stood stricken suddenly into immobility.

"Yes. I've finished up here now."

"Well, we'll be seeing you again before long."

"Certainly: I won't say 'good-bye'."

"Good-guy!" shouted Danny with the utmost cheerfulness.

Cecilia, her limbs leaden and her cheeks drained of colour, lifted herself somehow into the car. Fraser's shutting of the door sounded in her ears like the closing of the gates of heaven: she sank

back, too spent in spirit even to take one last look at her husband and, gathering Danny in her arms, buried her face passionately against his shoulder. She did not know what she had hoped, but she knew that, whatever her hope had been, it, like her life, was vain.

CHAPTER XXXI

CECILIA was removing the top of Danny's egg for him at breakfast on the following morning when Lady Wraybourne appeared in her dressing-gown at the door of the day-nursery. This was so unprecedented that, whilst the children shrilly called characteristic greetings and information to their Grannibel, Cecilia rose from her seat in sharp surprise.

"I didn't want to bother you with it last night," said Lady Wraybourne, nodding to Felicity and Danny and smiling at Cecilia, "but I've got to go to London for a couple of days or so, and I think it would be a good thing to take the children with me."

Every sort of wild surmise flashed through Cecilia's mind; she said nothing, looking inquiringly at Lady Wraybourne.

"Take me to-morrow!" sang Danny.

"Off to London!" cried Felicity, enraptured.

"Be quiet, babies: I can't hear myself speak," said Lady Wraybourne, laughing in spite of herself. "You make me wonder how I'll manage."

"D'you mean," asked Cecilia, struck with sudden dismay, "without me?"

"Yes. I'm taking Agnes, and I'll have MacDougall, of course. I shan't be gone more than a few days and the children must obviously get used to being without you."

It was said with kindness, but also with decision. Cecilia felt the words sink into her, like heavy stones dropped into a pool.

"I'm a person people do get used to being without," she said slowly.

"My dear," exclaimed Lady Wraybourne with energy, "you and the two children talk more nonsense than any three people I know! Don't be so ridiculous. It isn't a lasting separation, and there's nothing whatever to be depressed about. Quite the reverse. You ought to welcome a bit of holiday: you deserve it, any way."

"I'll try," answered Cecilia, ashamed of her weakness.

"Good. Have them ready by 11.45: that'll give us plenty of time."

Lady Wraybourne shook her head at Felicity who was stretching out a stealthy hand to the sugar-basin and limped energetically away. Cecilia sat a moment motionless amongst the clamour of the excited children: it was a sudden blow that she had received, robbing her of company just when she least wished to be left alone with her reflections. But her state of mind could not be helped by submission to distress; spirited resistance was needed. She roused herself resolutely and before breakfast was ended had even forced a smile.

She then fell upon the necessary packing, glad to have something so practical to do and welcoming the continual conversation made obligatory by the children whose ideas of assistance were based solely upon enthusiasm and defied all logic. Notwithstanding them, she was ready with the preparations and in the hall with both children and luggage by 11.45. As she stood a moment, watching the luggage being fastened by Fraser on to the car, a chance gesture of his, a trick he had of settling his cap firmly on his head with both hands, recalled vividly her similar moment waiting by the car for Lady Wraybourne at the hotel door the morning of the day she had first come to Darlingby. Little indeed had she known what lay before her, joy and pain both to an exquisite degree!

Lady Wraybourne, followed by her own maid, MacDougall, and an extremely nervous Agnes, descended to cut short further waiting. A few moments' energetic packing in followed, and all were ready to leave Cecilia, the children far too excited by the adventure to have a thought to spare for anything except the journey.

"We're going in a puffa, aren't we?" cried Danny vaingloriously.

"All the way to London!" shouted Felicity.

"By the way," said Lady Wraybourne, leaning forward, "there's one thing you might do for me if you will, Cecilia. That top left-hand little drawer of my writing-desk is in an awful muddle: I wish you'd go through it for me and sort it out,

will you? Do what you like with anything that seems done with: I know I can leave it to you."

"Very well, Lady Wraybourne," Cecilia assented, glad that there was anything in the world, however trivial, that she was still needed by anybody to do.

"All right, Fraser." Lady Wraybourne nodded to Cecilia with great kindness, the children screamed their farewells, the car started. Cecilia, her eyes misting in spite of all her resolution, was alone except for the butler, who sighed heavily with the air of a Lord Chancellor surrendering the Great Seal. Hatless, without occupation, she ran into the garden and roamed it disconsolately until it was time to eat an uncompanioned meal.

Luncheon over, the afternoon stretched, long and cheerless, before her: to assimilate itself, the weather turned unexpectedly to drizzle. Cecilia drifted to the window, and then, remembering Lady Wraybourne's parting request, decided that there could be no more fitting time for its performance: she went down forthwith to Lady Wraybourne's boudoir. This was a small, white-panelled room off the main stairs and facing south. On fine days it was a sun-trap, a most appropriate setting, Cecilia had often thought, for an old lady who was always gay. On this afternoon there were no sunbeams: the rain was pattering drearily on the window and the room seemed cold and lacking in life. Cecilia had never been in it before alone, and she looked round it now with curiosity. On a small side-table stood some photographs: she had instantly noticed

one of John the first visit she had paid Lady Wraybourne there. Now she was able to step across and gaze at it. A young John, years before he had entered her life, in uniform as a 2nd Lieutenant, taken obviously in the early days of the war: he had risen, she knew, to be a captain, twice slightly wounded, and had won a Military Cross. Long ago all that was, childhood days to her: and now he looked out of the frame at her smilingly. How much he had been through of which she had hardly even read! The knowledge of that was what had led her judgment so astray. Now the young face, so like the John she loved and yet so subtly unlike, gave her a sense of anguish quite unreasonable. And beside him stood an older photograph, of a lady unmistakably his mother, a face full of sweetness as well as of strength, that might have had so much meaning for Cecilia. How strange, how painful human relationships were! But it was no use spending time so. Cecilia turned from the photographs and drawing up Lady Wraybourne's own chair, sat down in front of the walnut writing-desk, set at an angle beside the big window, and opened the top left-hand little drawer, intending to make a thorough job of the sorting and hoping that it would occupy her all the afternoon.

When the contents of the drawer lay revealed, she stared at them doubtfully. Her memory of Lady Wraybourne's words was exact; she was quite certain she had opened the drawer that had

been specified, but surely there was some mistake? Lady Wraybourne had said it was "in an awful muddle": it was in nothing of the kind. It contained no more than a small packet of letters, fastened together with an elastic band, lying face downwards. Had Lady Wraybourne, in the fluster of departure, named the wrong drawer? That was possible, but would have been very unlike her exact and decisive mind. Without touching the packet, Cecilia tried the top right-hand little drawer, and then all the others—in each case the result was the same: all were locked. Intrigued and relieved of all fear of unauthorized intrusion, Cecilia took out the packet of letters and turned them over. Her heart gave a violent jump; they were four letters to Lady Wraybourne written by John: his handwriting cried vehemently aloud. But, more, they were letters that Lady Wraybourne now intended her to read. How? Why? Like an arrow revelation came: Lady Wraybourne knew!

Trembling uncontrollably, Cecilia slipped the elastic and drew out the first letter. It was dated November 21, a fortnight after her marriage and flight, and was written ill, in a very hasty hand.

"Dearest 'Aunt Sally'," it ran, "she's lost and I'm in despair. First steps were easy: a signalman had seen some one on the line that was obviously her, which gave us the certainty, and after that it was only a question of following that sable coat of hers. They couldn't go wrong: they tracked her

to a farm not far off and from there to Leomouth. There she got clothes—she'd money given her by Aunt Emily at the last minute, fivers, and these of course they could follow one by one. But now they've stopped and she's disappeared. They've lost her, all traces of her. What in the world am I to do? I stuck various lying notices in different papers that'll keep people quiet: but it's hell! If you've any sort of brain-wave, for God's sake send it along! Yours always, John."

As Cecilia's eyes devoured the hurried sentences, her breath came and went volcanically: over her memory rushed the pitiable unhappiness and straits of her first few days of flight; over her imagination poured the vision of a distracted husband. Mechanically she opened the second letter, dated December 29, equally short, equally ill-written:—

"Dearest A. S. You're a genius! That photo of me at Accra's done it. This morning I've got back the coat, together with the emerald, and a note, saying she simply couldn't keep them now. That doesn't matter: I've got the town she's in from the post-mark and if they can't get on to her track now they're worse than useless. Mayn't I go myself? Not if you advise against it. Oh, I'm so relieved. She's put me in the devil's own mess, but I've become a marvellous liar with practice, and any way, who cares? Thank heaven, she's as good as found. What next, most trusty counsellor? Yours, John."

Cecilia read, feeling as though the room were

whirling round her. All sorts of memories, upon which she had never dwelt in her concentration on her husband, became suddenly plain to her. Lady Wraybourne knew, Lady Wraybourne had always known: she had inserted the Accra photograph; she had been the arch-conspirator all through. No wonder she had shown no curiosity, she who was normally so insistent upon full understanding, when Cecilia after declaring she could not be bored at Darlingby and would be little likely to leave it of her own accord, shortly afterwards gave notice. No wonder she had insisted on Cecilia's dining downstairs that first evening of his return: no wonder—oh, what floods of thoughts, surmises, and hopes filled all of a sudden Cecilia's beating brain.

The third letter was dated the day after her arrival at Darlingby and was very short:—"Darling A. S. Whatever you say, I don't see how I can keep away, but I'll be guided by you. Thank God, she's safe and in the kindest hands in the world. Yours, John."

There was only one other, a note even more brief than the last:—"Darling A. S. Hurrah! If she's seen Hartley Harland, I must turn up p.d.q. Look out for me, bless you, and the devil take his own! J."

"Oh, Lady Wraybourne, Lady Wraybourne!" Cecilia exclaimed aloud to the room which seemed for all its silence to vibrate with the presence of its vivid owner. "I might have guessed!"

She caught up the four letters and kissed them. They were hers, though not written to her. 'Do what you like with anything that seems done with,' Lady Wraybourne had said: how like her, even then to give no hint! Cecilia recalled Lady Wraybourne's sudden anxiety when she thought for a moment Cecilia had unexpectedly run into John at Hartley Harland, her relief when she found it was not so and her telling her not to come down but go early to bed that night. She recalled too Lady Wraybourne's quiet request to her to get Danny's bricks when the world was rocking dizzily round her as she first faced John, and, most of all, she recalled how after John's appearance Lady Wraybourne had invited her confidence: "something's upset you: won't you tell me?" Almost she had given her her confidence then: as she had not, Lady Wraybourne in her delicacy had never once forced it. What she had done instead was tell the truth about John, not to her, but for her, first saying in her hearing that he was still 'terribly in love.'

Yes, Lady Wraybourne had been the soul of kindness, she had done all that was possible. It was not her fault that all her efforts had ended in failure. In spite of them all John had been unwilling to stay: he had had his apology and his only response was to say that 'he had finished up here' and was off. Not dear Lady Wraybourne's fault, her own. She believed John loved her, in a fashion, but not enough to forgive her. He had

rehabilitated himself; that had been his object, and he had achieved it. But his pride had been fatally wounded: for that injury she was for ever doomed.

How long Cecilia sat crumpled up in Lady Wraybourne's chair in front of the desk she did not know. She was dimly conscious that she had been sitting there a long time when she heard the wheels of a car crunching the drive beneath the window. The sound so coincided with the fading rainbow of her hopes that she sprang up as though she were an automaton the secret lever of whose mechanism had been pressed. She looked out, and then tears blinded her. Below was Fraser, just returned from taking Lady Wraybourne and the children as far as York. She knew she had expected nothing different, and yet she was stabbed through with disappointment.

Listlessly she sat down again, but she had scarcely gathered to herself the blackness of desolation when the butler peered in. Seeing her, he coughed slightly to announce himself and then came forward.

"Her ladyship has sent this letter back for you by Fraser, miss," he said, handing it to her.

"Forgotten something, no doubt," murmured Cecilia. "Thank you." She opened the envelope and read:—"My dear, terribly sorry to bother you, but could you possibly do an errand of mercy for me? I've just remembered, I promised I'd run over and see old Mrs. Granville this afternoon: she's too paralysed to write and she's something she wants to tell me. Do go and see what it is

she wants. Fraser'll take you over, of course. Many apologies. Sarah Isabel Wraybourne."

"Fraser is waiting, miss," explained the butler.

"Tell him I won't be a minute," said Cecilia. She was glad to be used: the mission would fill up her solitary hours better than she could fill them for herself. She closed the drawer, thrust the four precious letters into her dress, ran upstairs and, putting on her little hat and her coat, never smart and now tending to be shabby, joined Fraser at the front door. Fraser was always most friendly: he nodded to her now, she thought, with an increase of friendliness that caused her momentarily to wonder if he had been told her secret, but she was sure Lady Wraybourne would never add to its keepers needlessly. He had evidently had his orders and started off as soon as she climbed in.

It was all one to her where she went. She did not remember old Mrs. Granville, but Lady Wraybourne had never taken her on visits to friends—for reasons now obvious—and she was incurious. She lay back in the comfortable seat and idly watched the country. Soon they left the wooded dells amongst which Darlingby nestled and Hartley Harland reigned, and were out upon the great, wide moors, bleak and forbidding under the lowering clouds.

There is a satisfaction even in sorrow when Nature is sympathetic: Cecilia felt the driving scud of the rain against the windows as the car climbed in open spaces to be a very restful sound: however

uninviting the aspect of the sparse landscape, it could not be out of harmony with her. She remained in unwelcome reverie, not questioning but accepting, and took no special note either of the time or the way. It was not until the car began to descend and then to pass off the moorland to richer and gentler country that she had any realization that the journey had lasted a long time. When she did understand that, it possessed no importance. Fraser evidently knew where he was going, and Time was leaden on her hands: the longer the run the less daylight she would have to throw somehow behind her.

When, however, the daylight was beginning to die and still Fraser held on his way, Cecilia was sufficiently interested to lean forward and, putting back the front glass, ask him about it. He told her so casually they were nearly there that there was nothing further for her to question.

At last, when she was growing cold and beginning to feel conscious that a very long time had elapsed since lunch, Fraser turned the car off the main road along which they had been travelling and took first to a secondary road and then to one that had never had ambitions: a lane it had been and a lane it was proud to continue to be. In the chilly and wind-swept dusk it gained in favour by its lowliness: it was flanked on either side by pines, and they gave music, scent, and shelter. Between them the quiet air had an aromatic gift to bestow, and their sighing had a soft persuasiveness, a calling

to the stranger to grieve, if need be, but at all events to grieve melodiously.

Presently out of the gloom of the lane the car ran into the after-glow of the western sky and into silence. Fields stretched their peace on either side, and then a gateway, closed across the lane, arrested their progress. Fraser jumped out, set this open, and, returning, drove on before Cecilia had realized the obstacle. The car was now on a pathway through grassland and in another moment, round the corner of a small clump of pines, the lights of a house twinkled. Fraser drew up at the porch of this, and Cecilia, looking out, saw that it was small, more than a cottage but only a little more, a dwelling suited to a modest income and to a lover of peace. It struck her as isolated to an unusual degree: she had seen no other habitation for some time, and, remembering that Lady Wraybourne had written that Mrs. Granville was paralysed, she thought it must be a hard necessity that chained an invalid to it.

She had, however, little time for such reflection. Fraser, ordinarily rather slow of movement, again proved unusually active—he must be cold and eager to be starting back again, she thought: he was out of his seat and ringing the bell almost before she appreciated that she had arrived. The door was opened, but only a few inches, and a short colloquy took place. ‘Perhaps she’s not well enough to see me and I’ve had the run for nothing,’ thought Cecilia. But Fraser returned, grinning.

"They don't have many visitors here, miss," he explained; "but it's all right. Straight up the stairs, and it's the first door on the left at the top of them. You can go right up, she says."

"Is Mrs. Granville expecting me?" asked Cecilia dubiously.

"I wouldn't like to say," replied Fraser; "but it's all right; I asked."

"Very well," said Cecilia, getting out. "I won't be long. It's much later than I thought."

"Be as long as ever you want to, miss," rejoined Fraser very friendlyly, climbing back into his seat.

Cecilia passed under the darkness of the little porch and pushed the door open. A candle, shining in a beautiful old sconce on the wall opposite, showed her the little hall and the stairs leading out of it. She was surprised; the sconce was unusual and beneath it hung a mirror framed in tortoiseshell and walnut. In the hall was an oak chest, old and carved, and beside it a chair that even Cecilia's quick and untutored glance showed her to be of age and value. Mrs. Granville was obviously not in quite the straitened circumstances she had supposed.

Cecilia heard behind her the sound of the car in motion: 'Fraser turning round: what a hurry he's in,' she thought. 'I mustn't keep him.' She ran swiftly up the little stairs: at the top, to her relief, she saw a neatly dressed, elderly woman in a white apron, who stood awaiting her, her hand on the first door on the left.

"Mrs. Granville?" inquired Cecilia.

The woman without answering opened the door and smilingly motioned her in. As Cecilia was passing through she said very respectfully, "I hope you'll find everything you require, my lady. Dinner's at half-past seven." Before Cecilia could recover from the blinding flash of her astonishment, the door had been quietly closed behind her. She gazed about her, her heart drumming in her ears, her power of motion struck from her: she was in a bedroom much larger than she had expected, simply but beautifully furnished, and she was alone.

Her eyes, hardly able to see clearly for the wild flooding of her emotion, travelled first to the big, double bed on her left-hand side: on the pillow was placed a night-gown sachet worked with the initials C. H.; lying on the bed, near the foot, spread out and hanging down was a filmy, little, white evening dress; on the chair close to it were white silk stockings and a neatly folded pile of delicate, new under-garments; beneath the chair were a pair of small, white satin shoes. With a sharp intake of the breath Cecilia, leaning forward, her eyes widened to great, big Oes, recognized part of her wedding trousseau. For a moment she stood transfixed, then she tiptoed up to the bed, and timidly touched the dress with curious finger—it was real, it was no dream.

She came out of her trance, darted to the chest of drawers, snatched open the top drawer; it was

filled with the new possessions that had once been hers, that she had never thought to see again. She gazed at the dressing-table: the first thing she saw upon it, in the centre, in a little blue mug, was a small bunch of primroses. She bent over them to draw in their scent with ecstasy and then realized that the dressing-table was strewn with the little personal objects that she had packed for her honeymoon, and that pinned to the pin-cushion was a folded note in Lady Wraybourne's handwriting. She seized upon it, tore it open, and read:—"Dearest Cecilia, Just in case you're conscientious, the children's parents will be home in a day or two now. Till then we'll manage perfectly. I've still to get your wedding-present: just as well I forgot it or you might have remembered my name. I hope you tidied my desk nicely. Best wishes always. S. I. W."

Cecilia's eyes filled with tears: she put the note down on the dressing-table unseeingly and her hand came into contact with something cold. Dashing her tears away, she looked at it: she saw before her, lying in its open case, the big emerald pendant that she had sent back to her husband inside her sable coat: beside it, neatly folded, was laid the handkerchief in which it had been wrapped. She sprang to the wardrobe and threw open its door: nothing had been forgotten, nothing; the splendid coat hung there, smiling, it seemed, quite kindly at the shabby garment she was wearing.

She was still standing in the room, upright and wide-eyed, drawing uneven breaths and telling herself that in spite of her senses both of sight and touch she must be a spirit in a dream when she started convulsively and strained with all her might to listen. Some one had come into the room on the other side of the door immediately facing her. As she stood there rigid, she heard the sound of water falling from a tap. It fell and fell : it seemed to her like no sound she had ever heard in all her life before, at once so musical and so marvellous, a magic unbelievable in its strangeness and its beauty.

Then suddenly amidst the splashing of water arose the sound of a man's most cheerful singing. John's voice, and these were the words he sang :—

Warm, hands, warm ;
The men have gone to plough :
If you want to warm your hands,
Warm your hands now !

Cecilia's lips parted in a little, unconscious smile. She felt mechanically to make sure that she had safely on a ribbon round her neck the two rings from which she had never been parted, then she drew a very deep breath and, with her head back and her eyes half-closed, stretched out both her hands in silence towards the irresponsible, inexpressibly wonderful sound.

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